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THE INHABITANTS

By Julius Horwitz

THE CITY

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The Inhabitants

BY JULIUS HORWITZ



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To Lois and Jonathan and David

The people in this book are creations of the author's
imagination and any resemblance to persons
living or dead is purely coincidental.

THE INHABITANTS

1 Mrs. Boyd walked me to the door, still talking. I'm about the only person she talks to. She's over eighty and she lives on the top floor of one of the few respectable houses still standing on West 104th Street. All around her, the buildings have been torn down and vast ugly red-brick projects have risen like Herod's tombs. New York, unlike ancient Rome, has no ruins. The buildings are swept clean by bulldozers, the beams of wood and bricks collected piece by piece to be hauled away, and new buildings rise on unhallowed ground. Mrs. Boyd has arthritis and once a day she climbs down the five flights to go out into the street to shop and to see what remains of life. "I'm eighty-three," she tells me, "and I want to live to be eighty-four." She has no one to come and bury her when she dies. But it doesn't seem to bother her. I come to see her because the law says that all aged people over sixty-five who receive welfare have to be visited once every six months. She stood at the door talking about God. The real God, the God that lets you die in peace and not screaming in terror to spend another day on earth.

What did Mrs. Boyd tell me? I don't know how well you know God, or how well you serve Him, or more important, how much of an effort you make to appreciate Him. The most wonderful legend is that God made each one of us different so that we would not think He had any favorites. How else can you account for the differences among us, and the likenesses that bind us together when an infant is trapped in a landslide or an Arab king brings his sick child on a magic carpet from the desert to Bellevue Hospital? We respond to what binds us together as humans, yet when the day is short we unbind what holds us together and each man walks the street with a terrible fury. "For what and why I don't know. But I hold there must be a reason for our being on this earth. Can you tell me why?"

I left Mrs. Boyd and walked up 104th Street to Broadway to see Figueroa Mullina. Broadway is one of the longest streets in the world, it's also the ugliest. On a hot humid August morning you see the buildings simmering. The sky is a steamy gray. The people try to drown themselves with Riker's orange juice. Figueroa lives in the Chester, a building standing next to a Broadway cakeshop with cakes in the window that look as though they've been baked in a plastic factory.

The Chester is owned by a psychiatrist who collects \$12,000 a year on the lease and who never sets foot on the property. He couldn't, without vomiting up his breakfast. The lease is paid for by five men who take what is called a living out of the building. Zeussa manages the building. You can call him a devirtued man, since this is an age of naming the name. About twenty-five years ago he would have been called a cold fish. About fifteen years ago you would have called him a lousy bastard. But now we know

that some kind of a balance has been struck in his soul. He is what he is because of what he is—a lousy bastard. In my work I see so many sweet tender little bastards, really cute bastards, the real legitimate bastards, the illegitimates. Babies who are born without the father's name on the birth certificate. No marriage. So I don't really like to use the term "bastard" for Zeussa. He is what he tells me he is: "I hate these miserable dogs who live here. They're all slobs. I'd drown every one of them, the no-good slobs. They know enough to get their check, to get drunk, to call for ambulances, and to have ten babies apiece when my son-in-law can't support one baby." But he means no harm and he is harmless. The enemy sits elsewhere.

When I came into the lobby Isabel was giving him a hard time. "Please don't paint my room blue, please you have to ask me what color you're going to paint my room. I don't want my room painted blue. I want you to ask me what color I like. It's my room, I want it to be pretty, I want it to be beautiful."

"Look," Zeussa told her, "you want to paint it, paint it. You have my permission."

"But you're the manager, you're supposed to listen to me, I pay my rent. I want my room painted a beautiful pink."

"We don't paint rooms pink. This isn't a whorehouse."

"Such a nice man like you, you shouldn't talk to me like that. My whole family is dead, they all died in Europe, I have nobody, nobody, you shouldn't talk to me like that."

Isabel I knew from the fifth floor. I knew she only had one tooth in her mouth and when I told her she could go down to the City Dental Clinic and get a free plate, she

said, "I love my one tooth. It's my only tooth. I don't want it taken out of my mouth."

"Hello," Zeussa greeted me. "Who's got it tougher, you or me?"

"It's hard for everybody," I said.

"Except for those who don't have it so hard. And I know some of those people too. If I didn't, I'd walk two blocks over to the Hudson River and drown myself."

"Please, mister," Isabel turned to me. She didn't know my name. "You're a good man." (I had sent her \$36.05 to buy a winter coat and she told me she bought a second-hand coat at a rummage sale for \$6.00 and spent the rest of the money on lacy nylon underwear. "You won't tell on me," she said, when she showed me the underwear.) "Please," she said to me, "you tell him," pointing to Zeussa. "You tell him to paint my room pink."

"I can't," I had to say. "I can't tell him what color to paint your room."

"But please, the money comes from you. You send the money to him. I don't touch the money. I don't have the money to buy the pretty things I need. You think I would live here if I had money?"

"Look," Zeussa told her, "pack up and go!"

"You're a nasty man, a dirty nasty man!" She hurried away from the lobby desk into the elevator.

"I have to take it," Zeussa told me, "for what? So that I can eat and sleep in comfort in Flatbush." He pointed west to Broadway, West End Avenue, Riverside Drive. "I wouldn't live in this god-damn neighborhood any more if you gave me a penthouse rent-free. This is shot, killed, dead. These buildings are rat holes. Do you see the way they're eating away at West End Avenue? From both ends.

One day it will collapse right down the middle. Riverside Drive I won't talk about. You need a machine gun in your pocket after six o'clock. I knew this neighborhood when I was a kid. I know what I'm talking about."

"But neighborhoods are always changing," I told Zeussa.

"But this"—and he pointed again to the Broadway world outside the lobby, the Broadway that housed more people per square foot than even the slums of Tokyo, the West End Avenue apartments chopped into furnished rooms, and Riverside Drive that could never be denied the Hudson River. "I used to think this would stay forever. I used to think. Now they've got bombs that can get rid of all New York City faster than you or I could take a piss."

"Is Figueroa still up in Room 8?"

"He's still there. Tell me if I'm getting too personal, but how does a guy like Figueroa get it?"

"I can ask you," I said, "but you can't ask me. But anyway he's sick or was sick."

"Sick! When I'm sick I think twice before I call a doctor. And these slobs are down here every ten minutes for me to call an ambulance. An ambulance no less. In my old neighborhood the only time they dared to call for an ambulance was when the person was already dead. And the funny part is that the ambulances come now. And the doctors that come in here. You'd think I was running St. Luke's Hospital. I wish my health insurance policy gave me such protection." Zeussa paused and then told me, "Thank God I don't need their ambulances or their doctors."

The elevator was waiting and I rode to the fifth floor with its two long narrow corridors, the walls painted

a muddy green. Two toilets for each corridor. A community kitchen for both corridors. The toilet bowls always splattered and foul. The community kitchen the next best thing to eating out of a garbage can.

Before I could get to Figueroa's room, Mrs. Fenton in Room 3 stopped me. She was coming from the community kitchen with two fried hamburgers in a small black pan.

"I want to talk to you," she said to me. "Come in here for a minute." She opened the door to her room, removing the padlock. Chunks of plaster had fallen out of the ceiling, roaches crawled on her table. She had a painting on her wall that she told me she had bought for fifty cents at a bazaar on Broadway. A pastel of a wheat field, the sun a shining purple light.

"Sit down and listen to me," Mrs. Fenton said, stern with her age. She didn't notice the roaches. And why should she, when the roaches lived more comfortably than she did?

"Your hamburgers will get cold."

"That's not hamburger, it's round steak. You'd get sick from the hamburger meat they sell here."

"Where do you get money to buy round steak?"

"Once a week, for two mouthfuls."

"I told you what to do. Go down to St. Luke's Hospital and tell them that you need a special diet. That's the only way I can give you more money."

"I know it's not your fault. But I don't like to go to doctors and ask them for more money. I'd rather eat my mouthful of meat. But you shouldn't have written that letter to England about me. I didn't want them to know that I'm getting public charity."

"I had to write the letter."

"What do they have over there? Less than me on public charity. They live poor in England. Oh, I made my mistake. When I had my money I should have gone back to Kent."

"You can still go."

"And be a burden? No thank you. I made my money in New York and I lost my money in New York and this is where I'll stay to be buried."

"How much money did you have?"

"Thousands, you know that from the record. I worked every day of my life until I was sixty. Then I fell down at work in a faint. I woke up in a hospital. The nurse went through my papers and saw my bankbook. They wouldn't hold me for a free patient. Every week I had to take seventy-five dollars out of the bank. When I left the hospital I didn't even have money to pay carfare back to my old room. And that was gone. And you people put me in here. Look at this place!" Her voice began to shake and she had spots of red on her face. "I don't know how to get out of this, it goes around me. Look at me! I'm seventy-three years old. Don't ever get old. If you do get old, don't ever lose your money. And if you get old and lose your money, then don't ever lose your family." She stopped. Her hands were no longer shaking. She was quiet now and not as she had been an instant ago, like a fish jerked out of water, her mouth held by a hook. "All right, you can go now. I know you can't do anything for me. I should have done for myself." She cut into the meat. It was brown on the outside, red on the inside.

I closed the door to her room. I don't like to see my clients eating. Then it makes them look too alive.

I won't open Figueroa's door until you know who I am.

Get to work with me in the morning. First *The New York Times* and its tale of the slaughter of a hundred Berber tribesmen that makes no more sense than the death of two out-of-towners who were struck down on the West Side Highway. Where will the out-of-towners be buried? And who will weep for the Berber tribesmen? The *Times* is put away under the out-basket. I sit at a desk in a room about two hundred feet long and one hundred feet wide. It's an unbroken space, lit by great white globes. The walls are painted a battleship gray. The floors are wood, soft with age. The windows look out on Harlem and the churches abandoned by the believers of two of the world's three great faiths, as they are commonly known. Most of the people on the great soft wooden floor are Negroes. The job for them means a foothold. They can't sell their brains as yet to the midtown offices. The government hires people as they come on the C.S. list. There are a few Puerto Ricans who have left the island for the new island.

I came back to New York from Paris and Florence about two years ago. If you've written two books and a bunch of stories that try to make a little sense, if you've always kept yourself deliberately out of contacts so that you could work as you felt you had to work, if you've never held a nine-to-five job in order to live, then you begin to see how the rest of mankind lives and you realize you are where you've always placed yourself—outside. Nobody wants you. The employment agencies laugh at your record. The big organizations work only with people they've trained from puppies. The experience is not unique with me. George Moore experienced it on his return from Paris to London. Lincoln Steffens knew it when he stepped off the boat in New

York City. I returned with a six-month-old infant who was not as patient as I was with editors.

Enough of my apology for joining the human race. I don't mind the work I do. I have a load of eighty-five families. The eighty-five families have no income except what they receive in a welfare check. Some may have a little social security, some may have a son or daughter or father contributing a few dollars, but almost all haven't a penny in the world, nor any way of earning it, at least according to our information, and they live from check to check until their bodies are gently dumped into a nameless grave on Hart's Island—a grave no one is ever permitted to visit. I see the aged and sick once every six months, the people out of work and the women with the cheerful little bastards every three months.

Figueroa I have to see every three months. Every time I knock on his door he's in his pajamas. His bed is rumpled and he makes me feel I should apologize for waking him. He's slim with a chocolate brown body and a flaring nose. His lips are thick. His eyes are large and almond shaped. His cheekbones are high. His voice is educated. His English is better than most of the university graduates I've come across. He speaks quietly, with precision. You would think he was homosexual. I thought so the first time I saw him in his room. He sat on his bed and I sat on the only chair in the room. He leaned toward me as though he was going to strip off his pajamas. He keyed his voice very low. He smiled at me as dark-skinned people sometimes smile at white people, secretly, as though they know more secrets. Figueroa isn't Negro. He's Puerto Rican. He lied when he told me he was born in New York. But I'm used

to lying. You expect people to lie when money is involved. But in Figueroa's case there wasn't too much money. He was only getting \$40.25 from us every two weeks to live on. He had to give Zeussa \$21.67. That left him \$18.58 for two weeks. I asked him how he lived and he said, "That's why I sleep all the time." He was getting welfare because he had come out of a five-year narcotic sentence with no job and TB. He went straight into a ward. And when he came out, he wasn't able to work and the hospital sent him over to us. I asked Figueroa about his narcotic sentence. He said he took a package of the stuff to sell to a couple of guys at the IRT subway station on West 168th Street. The two guys turned out to be the police. He knew he couldn't talk because the guys who hired him would put a bullet in the back of his neck or else beat him to death in a vacant lot in East Harlem. So he sat in prison. He said he didn't mind prison. You get up, eat, read, do some work, go to sleep, and wait. You get to learn that time goes on without your help. I asked him why he sat on welfare. He said, "Get me a job." That's where we talked the longest. I knew the NYSES and our own employment people wouldn't refer a man for a job if they knew he had done time on a narcotic charge. So where could he work. That's what we tried to figure out in his room. Figueroa said he wanted a job in an office, wearing one of his eighty-dollar suits. I said what the hell can you do in an office? He said he once studied typing. I suggested he go to work in a travel agency. He could speak Spanish and he could tickle the girls who came in for a tour of the Islands. He said he would look into it. He also said he would like to work in a department store, selling men's suits or directing ladies to the ladies' room. He said he had seen men who do

nothing but get dressed up and walk around the main floor of Macy's and Gimbel's. I said all right, go make an application and forget to mention that you did five years for peddling dope. Finally I thought I hit on what he could do. Sell used cars. Figueroa would be perfect in a racketeering used-car lot. The job would be legitimate, yet it would have thieving in it. He could speak Spanish to the Puerto Ricans who were beginning to discover that a big costly Chrysler could be bought even if you didn't have a dime in your pocket. He would earn a lot of money. He could buy all the clothes he loved. He rubbed himself against his suits like a Siamese cat. He even asked me to give him my pair of Daks when they got a little too shiny. Figueroa said he would think about the used-car deal. I explained to him that the Manhattanville Chest Clinic had informed us that he no longer had TB, that he was now able to work a full eight hours. He could only expect to sit on welfare for a short time. He had to find work. He told me nobody starves in New York. All right, I told Figueroa, you're twenty-eight and you've learned how to tell time, you're a big boy, don't come crying. Figueroa smiled at me as though I was an innocent child. And I let him think so.

I knocked on the door. Figueroa answered in his striped pajamas. I walked in and sat down on the only available chair. I opened my notebook and asked him my stock opening question: "Can I see your latest rent receipt?"

"Sure," he said, and got up from the bed to fumble through the papers on top of his table.

It was then I saw the girl who was sitting in the corner of his room on the edge of the bed. She sat with her back to me and part of her profile showing. A light tan face

with a nose that had distinction before form. She looked young and I waited patiently for her to turn around.

Figueroa showed me his rent receipt of \$21.67. Ten dollars a week comes to \$21.67 on a semimonthly basis, which is the way we figure rent and the way the landlords figure rent. The extra days add up on a weekly basis. A month doesn't have four weeks for a landlord, it has thirty and thirty-one days. Figueroa used to complain about the extra days until I explained to him that his rent was budgeted separately from his food money. Then he said, "It's not my money anyway, let Zeussa have his Buick."

I asked Figueroa if he had been around to any of the used-car showrooms on Broadway in the 50's and 60's.

"I'm in trouble," he told me, "I couldn't do any looking."

"You'll be in bigger trouble if you don't look."

"I'll make it," he told me, "but not now."

"Why?" I asked.

"You're looking at her," he said to me. "Why don't you ask who she is?"

"You tell me."

"I'll tell you," the girl said. I heard her voice before I saw her face. Her voice was soft but deep and she used it as an instrument to make herself immediately known. Most American girls save their revelation for bursts of anger. This girl I felt was always on the point of revelation. At least that's what her voice suggested to me. And when she turned to face me I first saw that she was Negro, possibly Spanish, possibly white. And then I saw she held a baby wrapped up in a bright white kimono.

"Your baby?" I asked Figueroa.

"Yes," he said, and the girl looked relieved.

"You haven't had it long. How old is the baby?" I asked the girl.

"One month," she said, and her voice was almost a whisper.

"You aren't living in this room with the baby?"

"I am," she said.

"You don't have a place to stay?"

"No."

"But you have to stay somewhere with the baby."

"That's why I'm staying in Figueroa's room."

"But you can't go on staying in this room. You don't have a kitchen. You don't have a refrigerator. You don't even have a place to store milk."

"She's on my breast."

"Then you don't have a place to bathe her." The kimono was spotless. The baby looked clean. It was asleep. The girl held the baby as though she knew what she was doing.

"I try to keep her clean."

"Not in these toilets," I said.

"I try anyway."

I turned to Figueroa. "What are you going to do now?" I asked.

Figueroa said, "I thought you might have some suggestions."

"Like what?" I asked.

"I'm broke," Figueroa told me. "All the money I've got is on the table. Two dollars and fifty cents. I can't support the baby. I can't even buy a can of baby powder."

"If you got a job you could."

"But I don't have a job."

"Do you intend to get married?"

The baby started to cry. The girl took up a diaper from

the bed and laid it across her chest. She opened her blouse and put the baby to her breast.

"Tell him," she said to Figueroa.

Figueroa took out his handkerchief from his pajama pocket. He unfolded the handkerchief, showing me clots of blood.

"I've been spitting," he said. "I don't know where I'm sleeping from one night to the next. We've been living on frankfurters and rolls in this room."

I turned to the girl. The diaper covered her breast and her sucking baby. On the dresser I could see a small can of talcum powder, a bottle of baby lotion, a card of diaper pins, a brush and comb set, a pair of plastic pants, five folded diapers.

"Where do you wash your diapers?" I asked her.

"The dirty ones I take to the laundermat. The others I wash by hand."

"Is this your first baby?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Where did you have the baby?"

"Metropolitan Hospital."

I turned to Figueroa. "Does Zeussa know she's staying in your room?"

"He knows."

"Has he complained yet?"

"Not yet."

"But he will, as soon as he knows I know."

Figueroa opened his almond eyes. He had kept his eyes almost to slits, and I thought he was back on narcotics, though he told me he would never touch the stuff. A Federal man told me how to spot Figueroa if he began using the stuff again, his speech would become compliant, his

eyes lazy, his body sit as though it was propped up on pillows. The body is getting something for nothing. It's coasting through the long night. The big knives are being sharpened elsewhere.

Figueroa got up from the bed.

"You see the size of this room! What can we do here?"

"Zeussa can get you a large room," I said.

"We're not going to live together for now," Figueroa told me. "That we've had out for now."

The girl stiffened on the bed. The baby felt the stiffening. The breast was out of its mouth. The baby cried. The girl rocked the baby. The diaper fell away from her breast. Her skin was dark on her breast. The milk showed up white. She let the diaper lie and brought the baby to her breast again.

The sucking was all we heard in the room for an instant.

The baby's skin was light, its nostrils flared, its hair black.

2 I watched the baby hungrily sucking its milk.
The baby would never know happier days.

"You can feed her now," I said to the girl,
"but what about six months from now, a year? You didn't
always live in this room. Where do you live?"

"East Harlem," she said, and she said no more, knowing
I would know what she meant by East Harlem.

"Where in East Harlem?" I asked. I knew East Harlem.
But I wanted to know what she had been doing in East
Harlem.

"103rd Street."

"Between what avenues?"

"Lexington and Park."

Lexington and Park are fancy street names in New York
City. But East Harlem begins at the end of Lexington
Avenue, at the end of Madison Avenue, at the end of
Fifth Avenue, at the absolute dead end of Park Avenue.
The narcotic sellers have made it their open-air market.
They've taught everyone from kids to old women to jab

needles into their arms or sniff up white powder. Narcotics in East Harlem are what gin must have been in Hogarth's London. But the taking of narcotics is a lonely business. You don't see addicts lolling on the street corners of Lexington Avenue. No one on the outside could ever know what was going on in the inside of East Harlem. I had a glimpse. And I'm willing to share the glimpse with you. But later. Now I was interested in the girl, trying to figure out what brought her to Figueroa's thirty-inch cot.

"Did you live by yourself?" I asked.

"No, with my mother."

"Then why don't you go home with the baby to your mother?"

"I would like to," she said, "but she's afraid to have me in."

"Did you ask her?"

"Yes."

"And she said no?"

"Her mother's on welfare," Figueroa told me, "and her mother's afraid that her investigator will cut her off if she brings Kenny in with her."

I turned to the girl. "What's your mother doing on welfare?" I asked.

"She has no way of working."

"They won't close her case. That's no reason to close a case. Does she have a legitimate apartment or a furnished room?"

"She has four rooms. It's a railroad flat."

"That means there's an inside toilet and a bathroom."

"It's no good," the girl said. "I stayed at my mother's. But my mother's too frightened of being cut off and no one could convince her otherwise. And I think my having

a baby this way didn't do her any good. It probably made her realize all over again who she is and what she's done."

The last line determined me to help the girl.

Anybody else could only give the girl talk. You'll be stunned by what I could give her. Let me itemize: 8 milk bottles (Pyrex), 2 4-ounce bottles, 12 nipples, 10 nipple caps, 1 sterilizer with rack, 1 bottle brush, 1 nipple brush, 1 glass jar with cover for nipples, 1 pair of tongs, 1 measuring saucepan, 1 set measuring spoons, 1 funnel strainer, 1½ yards water-repellent sheeting, 3 crib sheets, 1 blanket (a full-size blanket to be cut into 4 small crib blankets), 4 bath towels, 3 washcloths, 1 large plastic basin for bathing the baby, 1 diaper pail with cover, 1 reconditioned crib with springs and new mattress, 1 baby carriage, 1 highchair—a layette totaling \$29.10. There's more, much more, but these are the immediate items for the baby. For the girl I could give a furnished room or apartment, money for food, even a houseful of furniture if she could locate an unfurnished apartment, plus clothing, medical care. Everything but a father for the kid. We live in an age of social enlightenment, with two social workers, a psychiatrist, a pediatrician, and a marriage counselor springing up out of the pavement of N.Y.U. for every grown adult. Pills will usurp the psychiatrists. Time will teach many of them to keep silent like bankers and tend only to the harvest. But what will ever take the place of oneself? I looked at the girl and asked in grand succession: Why was this girl born? How does she live? How will she die?

"What did your mother do that other people don't do?" I asked her.

"Her mother's a son of a bitch," Figueroa said. "Can we let it go at that for now?"

"What about your mother?" I asked Figueroa.

"She has TB worse than I ever had it."

"It must be arrested or she would be in a hospital."

"It's arrested. But it still has her down on her back. She's in no condition to have a newborn baby in her house. You know my mother's place," Figueroa told me.

I had been up to his mother's two rooms on West 105th Street about three months ago. I had to visit Figueroa's mother to see if she was in a position to contribute toward the support of her son. Did you know that a mother, father, and grandparents are legally responsible for their children and grandchildren, and that children are legally responsible for their parents, but not their grandparents? "Legally responsible" means that if a person is able to contribute and doesn't want to, then there has to be a court action. Fathers are forced to take children into court. Children take their parents into court. Grandparents are startled to learn that they still have some responsibilities. Parents howl when they are reminded of their legal responsibility. Children spit on their parents when they're reminded of their legal responsibility.

Mrs. Mullina told me, "Send Figueroa to work." "The doctors say he can't work," I told her. "He'd work if you didn't give him money. I go out and work. He's thirty years younger than me, he's ten times as strong, only I lived with a crazy man when I had him." Figueroa's father was cut to pieces in a knife fight in Santurce.

Figueroa asked me, "Can't she apply for welfare?"

"Anybody can apply," I said.

The girl laid the baby down on Figueroa's cot. But first she put a clean diaper over the bed sheet. She didn't look like a mother, except for her swollen breasts. And

she certainly didn't look like an applicant for public assistance. She wore a white blouse that easily opened for nursing, a finely tailored skirt, and had her stockings pulled straight. Her shoes were expensive. She looked clean. I rarely see clean girls in the buildings I visit. They all look unwashed.

"Do you want to apply for welfare?" I asked the girl.

"I think I have to," she said. She had finished diapering the baby and she opened her blouse to give her breast again to the baby. The infant knew exactly what to do. It's perhaps the only time in our lives when we know exactly what we're doing. It is an extraordinary sight to watch a woman who isn't your wife nursing a baby. The woman sits like the sun hanging free and loose in the sky. In sex the man never touches bottom. He may be trying to close up the circle but it doesn't work. Sex is always the next time. Even in the middle of sex you think the next time, the next time will be better. You can't plant a piece of your self in a woman. You are what you are, a body cut off from all other bodies, and that's the way it is for everybody from me to you. But in a nursing baby you see the completeness. There's no intermediary. No milkman, no Borden's cow, no canned Carnation. I didn't try to avoid her breast but looked at it as though I could still close the circle. You know as well as I do that it's the one dream that persists in our head as long as we persist.

Figueroa was the father of all this, the mother, the nursing baby. I asked Figueroa, "If she goes on welfare, are you going to live together?"

"I told you before," Figueroa said, "we can't make it together now."

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm spitting blood, I haven't got a job, I wouldn't know what to do with a baby now. The baby's not for me. Can't you get her a room on the West Side?"

"I can get her a lot of things, you know that, but she doesn't look like a welfare client." The girl looked up from her nursing baby. "You don't," I told her. "Can't you figure out a way of staying off welfare?" I asked her.

"I've tried to but I can't."

"You'll be a dog in six months on welfare," I told her.

"But it's just to get started," she said.

"Started for what?"

"I can be working in six months."

"Not if you live in these god-damn houses on the West Side. Every guy who can walk will be after you."

"I can handle that."

"Look," I told her, "I've seen second-generation mothers like you on welfare. The mother is on welfare, the daughter grows up on welfare, then she gets a baby and she graduates to her own separate case. If you don't apply now, then maybe you can beat it."

"How," she asked, "if I have no money and no place to stay?"

"Your mother."

"If I had a mother."

"She'd be your mother if you ask her."

"I did ask her."

"Ask her again. Go see her tonight. This afternoon. Take the kid with you. Ask your mother to put up a bed for you, a crib for the baby. I'll stop by here tomorrow afternoon to see what's happened."

I left Figueroa's room and walked into the dirty green corridor. One bulb lit the corridor. There was a sign

posted on the door telling the tenants to keep the door shut tight as a prevention against fire. I rang for the elevator but didn't feel like trusting my luck to the elevator cable and walked down the four flights. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The sun was still a steamy gray. The sky was heavy with humidity. The people on the street looked like melted wax images. I stood back on the sidewalk and looked up at Figueroa's room. His window faced Broadway. Figueroa and the girl were now talking, and what they were saying would be forever lost to the world. It's difficult enough to know what I really feel and know, to start with Figueroa. Let him tell me. Let the girl tell me.

In this heroic mood I got on the Broadway bus and paid my fifteen-cent fare like every other passenger and rode back to my office.

I found a message waiting for me from Figueroa. I phoned and Mrs. Mercado in Room 9 answered the hall telephone. She recognized my voice and immediately asked me for an electric iron and an ironing board. I promised her the iron and ironing board and asked her to call Figueroa to the phone. "Him," she said. "Are you sure he's up?"

"Hello," Figueroa said, "I called just after you left here. Look, Kenny can't go back to her mother's. The mother is a son of a bitch and this new kid has sent her into a stupor. She threatened to cut up Kenny if she put her foot into the house. She'd do it or at least if she got wild enough she would. Kenny didn't want to tell you all this. Kenny was practically supporting her mother until she had to quit work with the kid. Some investigator in East Harlem crossed up the mother with all kinds of re-

budgeting stories. The mother's afraid of being cut off. You know how it works. Can you give her a break?"

"I'll try," I told Figueroa. "I'll be out to your place in the morning."

I pulled Figueroa's case record out of the file cabinet. The case record is divided into two sections. The first section contains the application forms and the recorded interviews. The second section contains all of the letters, memos, the ledgers of people who get caught up by agencies. Figueroa had a thin case record. Some records are as fat as a Sunday *Times*. The first entry, dated September 24, was headed, "Pending Investigation." It read like this:

9/24/57: Worker visited and interviewed Mr. Figueroa Mullina on marginal date.

Mr. Mullina applied for public assistance on 9/20/57, stating he was discharged from the hospital with an arrested TB condition and as a result of his physical condition, the doctors stated that he could not work at a full-time job.

Living Conditions: Mr. Mullina occupies a single furnished room in the Chester. Worker saw his rent receipt dated 9/1 to 9/8, in the amount of \$10.00. Mr. Mullina is now two weeks in arrears in his rent. The room is neatly furnished, though very small. It contains a single bed, a chest of drawers, a chair, and a small night table. Mr. Mullina has a small table-model radio. Mr. Mullina said he has been living in the room since 8/1/57, the date of his discharge from the hospital. Mr. Mullina said he had known of the Chester from a friend. The room does not have a private toilet, nor cooking facilities. These facilities are shared with other tenants on the floor. There are approximately ten rooms who use one toilet and one

community kitchen. Mr. Mullina said he gets along all right in his room because he manages to cook simple foods and since he is on a high-protein diet, he fixes only chops and hamburger steaks.

History: Mr. Mullina gave us the following details about himself. He said he was born in Puerto Rico but moved to New York City at a very early age and he has no recollection of Puerto Rico. Mr. Mullina said he attended New York City public schools until the 10th grade, when he left school to seek employment. Mr. Mullina said that he has never been married and that he has no out-of-wedlock children. Mr. Mullina informed us that in June 1952 he was arrested for selling drugs in N.Y.C. He said he was arrested in a subway station and that as a result of his arrest, he was sentenced to serve five years in Clinton Prison located in Dannemora, N.Y. Mr. Mullina said he was using drugs at the time of his arrest but that he was not thoroughly addicted to drugs. Mr. Mullina said he was selling drugs for the profit involved and not because he was a pusher. Mr. Mullina told this Worker that a pusher was the lowest kind of drug peddler and that he influenced others to take drugs. Mr. Mullina said he did not undergo any kind of treatment for drugs while he was incarcerated. Mr. Mullina would tell this Worker no other information about his drug activities. He said that he was not involved in drugs at this time and that he had served his five years and, although he wasn't under parole or probation, he knew that he would be liable to an early arrest if he became involved in drugs, and he said he had no interest in returning to jail. It should be noted here that Mr. Mullina was extremely well-dressed, particularly for an applicant of public assistance. Mr. Mullina said that the clothes he had were from the period before he went to prison and he further stated that if you buy good

clothes, the style seldom changes very radically. Mr. Mullina showed this Worker his wardrobe which consisted of 7 suits, all of them in excellent condition, 3 pairs of shoes, 1 topcoat, 1 raincoat, and 1 winter-weight coat. Mr. Mullina said he had an adequate supply of underwear and socks but that he did need some neckties. He said his ties didn't seem to be in fashion now. An examination of Mr. Mullina's clothes revealed that they were worn and not recently purchased. Mr. Mullina said he tried to find employment after his discharge from the hospital but he quickly realized that he was not able to put in a full day's work.

Employment: Mr. Mullina's past employment history was discussed. Mr. Mullina said he had never been gainfully employed except for a short period after he left school. Mr. Mullina said he quickly learned to live off the streets in the East Harlem neighborhood where he grew up. Mr. Mullina said there was no way of verifying his past employment.

Relatives: Mr. Mullina said that his father, Francisco, is deceased. He said that he died in Santurce, P.R. Mr. Mullina said he never knew his father, as his mother left his father and Puerto Rico about 23 years ago. Mr. Mullina said his mother lives on West 105th Street. He said his mother is ill but that she hasn't applied for Welfare and that she manages to support herself by doing light domestic work several days a week. He said her rent is very cheap and she has very few expenses. Mr. Mullina acknowledged no other relatives.

Resources: Mr. Mullina said he once had a Special Checking Account at the Manufacturers Trust Company, however that was closed out in 1952. Mr. Mullina said that he has no other resources. He claims no insurance policies, no compensation payments, no veteran payments, no bank

accounts, no union benefits. Mr. Mullina said he is not a veteran. He stated that his physical condition kept him out of the army.

Residence: Residence in N.Y. is established by hospitalization.

Laundry: Mr. Mullina said he has his shirts done at the laundry. He said he now wears four clean shirts a week. He said that he washes his other clothes in the laundermat at the cost of \$.25 a machine and that he usually needs one full machine every two weeks.

Health: The medical statement from the hospital indicates that Mr. Mullina had TB in 1951, just prior to his sentence for narcotics. However, the condition didn't become serious until his discharge from prison, and soon after his discharge, he was hospitalized. Mr. Mullina now has an arrested TB condition and it is important that he keep all of his appointments at the Manhattanville Clinic.

Worker 67 Mr. Sandler D. 9/24/57

9/25/57: Worker submitted forms 640A and 621 re housing clearance.

Worker submitted letter to Clinton Prison re background of Mr. Mullina.

Worker submitted 412B re medical report on Mr. Mullina.

Letter submitted to Dept. of Health in Puerto Rico re death of Mr. Mullina's father.

Form W500 sent to mother of Mr. M. re ability to contribute.

Memo sent to C.O. re known narcotic background of Mr. M.

Collateral 9/27/57: Worker visited Mrs. Mullina, mother of applicant. Mrs. Mullina lives in a two-room cold-water flat that has been recently converted to steam. The apartment is neat and adequately furnished. Mrs. Mullina

informed us that she is employed as a domestic and she works only three days a week. Her income is \$8.00 a day, plus carfare. Mrs. Mullina pays \$26.75 a month rent and showed Worker a series of receipts dating back to 1956. Mrs. Mullina said she was not in a position to contribute toward the support of her son. She said that he could live in the apartment with her, however he did not want to stay in her house but preferred to live out. Mrs. Mullina said her income is adequate for her needs. Mrs. Mullina was informed of the department's policy in regard to legally responsible relatives. She gave us the phone numbers of the three women for whom she works and stated that we could contact them, however she asked us to make it clear to her employers that she was not applying for assistance and she asked us not to state that her son was applying. We said we would honor her request. Mrs. Mullina had no receipts or pay slips indicating her income. Mrs. Mullina would give us no further information concerning her son. Mrs. Mullina did give us the date that Mr. Mullina was killed in Puerto Rico. She said he died January 5, 1934, in Santurce, Puerto Rico. She said she was not living with him at the time. She said that he was involved in a knife fight with a man to whom he owed some money and that the man stabbed him to death. Mrs. Mullina acknowledged no resources other than her employment and a \$500 policy which she said she carried for burial purposes.

Worker 67 Mr. Sandler D. 10/4/57

10/3/57: Worker received telephone call from interviewer at the Division of Employment and Rehabilitation. This Worker advised DER that Mr. Mullina was a pending AD case and he was not to be referred to DER for employment. However, the DER interviewer told this Worker that Mr. M. had reported to their office very expensively

dressed and had discussed employment at great length but did not appear to show the slightest inclination to be referred for employment. We advised DER that we were awaiting the AD report on Mr. M. and we could take no action until we had a determination of his employability.

10/4/57: Worker received a telephone call from the manager of the Chester who advised us that he was going to lock out Mr. M. for nonpayment of rent. We advised the LL that Mr. M.'s case was pending and we would take action within several days.

10/7/57: Worker visited Mr. Mullina at the Chester. Mr. M. was in bed at the time the visitor called. Mr. M. made an attempt to apologize for being in bed by stating that he didn't feel well. However, this Worker has a strong suspicion that Mr. M. may actually be employed at night, since he doesn't seem to be particularly concerned about his problems at this time. However, this attitude may stem from his long imprisonment and his dependence on authorities to meet his needs. Mr. M. seems to know perfectly well that he wouldn't be permitted to go hungry. However, Mr. M. hardly looks like the type of person who would permit himself to needlessly miss a meal. It is possible that he may be applying for assistance to have a respectable front for whatever activities he may be engaged in. But this is only a supposition on the part of the Worker and there is no verification. Mr. M. had nothing new to report to this Worker. He did say that he had been to the New York State Employment Office but he was not referred for a job opening. We again asked Mr. M. why he did not wish to live in his mother's apartment. Mr. M. stated that he did not want to be dependent on his mother and he felt his physical condition might endanger her health. Mr. M. of course

learned in prison how to give the correct answers to any number of questions.

Recommendation: On the basis of the medical statement and the conference held with the Medical Social Worker this Worker is accepting this case for public assistance, as a Pending Aid to the Disabled.

I didn't write the pending investigation. The case was transferred to me by a Worker from across the floor in Unit Q. I knew the Worker. He was tall, fat, carried a cheap plastic brief case, and he was studying law at St. John's University. He liked to make jokes in the elevator. I walked across the room to ask him about Figueroa.

"Did you ever know any of Figueroa's girl friends?" I asked.

"I think the son of a bitch was pimping but I couldn't ever prove it. I walked in on at least five different girls that he had in his room. If he wasn't pimping, then they probably supported him. The bastard couldn't live two days on what we gave him."

"Then why didn't you close his case?"

"For what reason? He had a pension with his TB. But now that he doesn't have TB, I think he is a PI."

"Do you remember any of his girl friends? The name Kenny?"

"No. I didn't really take in the girls. They all had a kind of cheap pretty look. None of them with style. Are you going to keep his case open?"

"For a little while."

"You know his budget deficit isn't enough to keep his suits pressed."

"Do you think he's still pushing dope?"

"I don't know what he's doing, but I do think he's trying to stay out of jail. Two good hustlers could take care of his needs. He has that transparent look that hustlers like in their pimps. At least all the pimps I used to know in Brownsville had Figueroa's look, the well-kept pimps."

"Which is something we can't prove."

"Put a special investigation on him if you keep the case open. I still think the bastard works at night. He has to do something. He just can't manage on the money we give him."

"He said he eats frankfurters."

"Even franks cost \$.69 a pound at the A & P."

"I think he works but we can verify that later. Right now he has a kid exactly one month old. He says he can't buy the kid a diaper."

"The son of a bitch *wouldn't* buy the kid a diaper, that's what he means. The holy act of birth. Three-quarters of the churches in this city would close up shop if they spent a week in this department. So Figueroa's thing really works. I didn't think the bastard had it in him. He actually produced a living breathing human child. And I think of my poor pathetic friends in Flatbush who can't get a kid because they're tied up into a hundred different knots. Untie the knots and have a baby. The baby won't make much difference to Figueroa. He knows the mother can always get welfare and hustle for him on the side."

Sandler left to answer the unit telephone. He was tough from his days in Brownsville when he got beat up every afternoon for carrying a brief case to school. He liked to reminisce about Brownsville as though he had been an original member of Murder, Inc. Brownsville (if you don't happen to read the paperback books) is that

stretch of Brooklyn in East New York with Pitkin Avenue as its capital, which became famous as the recruiting center for the paid assassins of Murder, Inc. The honors once due Brownsville had now been transferred to East Harlem.

I returned to my desk and found a message from Miss Kenny Fletcher. The message read to call Figueroa's room at the Chester. I put the message aside for the morning. The girl's breasts were still full. She had the room at Chester's. Figueroa could get up a meal for the night. She had no immediate emergency. I also knew that Figueroa was going to spend the night with her in the room on that thirty-inch cot. That I didn't like. Figueroa had noticed the way I had looked at the girl. And my interest had aroused his interest in her again. As for the baby, Figueroa had been around East Harlem long enough to know to put the baby in an empty dresser drawer. I just hoped he knew enough not to close the dresser drawer.

3 I didn't get to Figueroa's room in the morning. I had just hung up my jacket and started to read the "Letters to the Editor" columns in the *Times* when the phone rang for me. It was Petra. I had known Petra for about a year. She lived in a big furnished room on West 107th Street. She had a back room that faced an enormous brick wall. She liked the room because it gave her a privacy she hadn't been able to find in the other West Side buildings. Petra had seven children by five different men. One father, Arthur Colon, had been murdered in Los Angeles, two fathers were serving time for selling narcotics, one father I couldn't locate, and one father lived in Jersey, married, with a large family of his own. The father in Jersey contributed \$3 a week for the support of a baby that was born out of two casual meetings in Petra's room on West 104th Street. The father liked his baby and sent the money to the court every Friday afternoon. Petra hated him. She hated all of the men who had given her babies. She had shipped six of

her children to Puerto Rico and she kept the youngest child with her. The baby was three years old and named Alida. Petra had a case record as thick as the Manhattan telephone directory. Petra liked me because I told her to concentrate just on taking care of Alida and I would take care of the five fathers.

"Mr. Phillips—you have to come and see me! Now! Right away! I think I am going to stick Alida's head in the oven. She makes me too much trouble."

Petra had been complaining about being nervous. She chewed aspirins like pistachio nuts. She said she couldn't sleep. She was up almost every night, all of the night. She couldn't lie down with the past. The murdered father slept with her, she told me, the other fathers, all five, Jesus Christ love me, she said, why didn't I have one father, the baby drives me crazy, all day she's in the room, all day she wants to play, go out on the street, what can I do with her, the noises on the street drive me crazy. I sent Petra to St. Luke's Hospital to discuss her disturbed sleep and she showed me two boxes of pills they had given her. She couldn't stand the little girl in the room. And the girl was incredibly sweet. The sweetness must have tortured Petra. I mentioned it to our Medical Social Worker and she said write a psychiatric on Petra. But now there didn't seem to be time to write a memo.

"Why?" I asked Petra.

"You know, Mr. Phillips. Come now and talk to me. I think both Alida and me will die."

"Look," I told her, "don't stick your head in the oven and I'll be over to your place in about twenty minutes. Make me some coffee instead."

I hung up and caught the IRT train to 96th Street

and Broadway and rode uptown to 103rd Street. Petra lived right off Broadway. From the outside the building looks like a solid West Side building. Inside you won't believe your eyes. I didn't the first time I entered the building. You go to the fourth floor and knock on a door marked 4A6. You think it's an apartment. Then you see the door is slightly ajar. The door leads to a narrow corridor. On both sides of the corridor are rooms approximately seven feet wide and nine feet long. The rooms have been partitioned off from old six- and seven-room floor-through apartments. The two toilets that used to take care of the morning tooth brushing for two families now take care of twenty families and about sixty people. I don't think anyone ever gets his teeth brushed. But a lot of heroin is neatly injected into the left arm. And kids, five, six, seven, and eight, earn their first extra money in a manner that would make Juvenal flee the city and live in a cave.

Petra was lucky. She had a back room that just couldn't be chopped up into a smaller room. She kept her room clean and free of roaches and invested \$13.50 in a police lock. A police lock is an iron bar that is braced against the door. The lock is ugly. The bar is an inch-thick rod of iron. I had a friend who once lived with a police lock on West 79th Street but they've fled the city for Santa Barbara. I asked Petra to move a hundred times, but each time she said she was used to the building and she knew the faces and she didn't want to look on strange faces again.

I hurried down the corridor to Petra's room. Her door was locked and I heard the police lock scraping against the floor when I said, "It's Phillips."

The little girl Alida was sitting in a hand-painted Mexican rush chair, smiling and holding a doll. Petra was standing by the bed, straightening the denim bedspread.

I smiled at Alida and she called me, "Poppa."

"She always calls you 'Poppa,'" Petra said.

I gave Alida two packages of bubble gum.

"Say thank you," Petra almost screamed at her. Alida didn't know what to do. She got up from the chair and ran toward the bed.

"Don't mess the bed!" Petra shouted at her. "You see," Petra told me, "I can't live with her. She drives me crazy. Every minute she doesn't know what to do. Run, run, run, make noise, make me sick—look at the aspirins I took last night. I don't eat, I don't drink, only aspirins. I think I'll kill the baby and myself. It's the best way."

"For what?" I asked Petra.

"To live, don't you think? Maybe we'll go to God. This way we don't go to God. If I wasn't such a terrible woman I would go to church. I would talk with a priest. But I've been too terrible a woman. No priest will listen to me. He'll listen and then he'll say to himself, she's no good, and he'll go and eat his supper. Last night I put Alida's head in the oven. I told her it was a game. Mama, mama, she cried to me, I don't like it. She knew. She knows I love her. But I want to kill her. I smell gas now. I think I lit the oven without the fire."

I went up to the stove. None of the burners were on. I smelled around the oven. I didn't pick up a gas leak.

Petra told me, "I couldn't sleep last night smelling the gas. Each minute I thought, now I die. I got out of bed

fifty times to kiss Alida. She was sleeping and I thought she was dead."

"Look," I told Petra. "There's no leak. I don't smell gas. You shouldn't keep the window bolted. Then some air would get into your room."

"I have to," Petra said.

The girl Alida sat on the bed.

"You see!" Petra screamed. "She can't sit still. She drives me crazy. I don't know what to do with her. I think she should be in a Catholic school. Mr. Phillips, can you place her in a Catholic home? She can't live with me any more. You have places to send children without parents."

Alida didn't know what to do. She jumped off the bed like a kitten and sat down on her pink-and-yellow chair. She picked up a dime-store plastic milk bottle from the floor and started giving milk to her rubber doll.

"You see!" Petra shouted again. "From the bed to the chair to the table and then to the bed and the oven and back to the chair and then out in the hall and then playing in the toilets and then running down the halls. She fell down yesterday and I had to rush her to St. Luke's. I think I'll kill her and myself and you can tell them why I killed myself and my baby, Mr. Phillips."

I believed now that Petra really meant to kill Alida. I believed it because the pit of my stomach was cold and my hands were burning.

I asked Petra, "Look, do you really feel sick? Do you want a doctor? A doctor who can talk to you, who can listen to what you say, who can tell you what you say or what you really mean to say."

"Not Bellevue," Petra said. "I don't want to go to Bellevue!"

"Bellevue isn't the only hospital in New York."

"That's where they take the crazy people."

"Nobody said you're crazy."

"If I say I want to kill my baby, then they'll say I'm crazy."

"Look, Petra, I can go to the telephone and call our office and they can send a doctor up here within an hour. Is that all right with you?"

"If I don't go to Bellevue."

"I'm not a doctor, I can't tell you what the doctor will say. I'm just asking if you want a doctor."

"Yes, if you think so."

"I think you need a doctor, Petra."

"Then you go call the doctor. I'll give Alida her breakfast."

"All right."

I went out to the hall telephone and left the door ajar to Petra's room. I called the office, asked for medical, and hurriedly informed them of the situation. Within forty-five minutes a psychiatrist came up the fourth floor. He carried a black doctor's bag and looked ready to faint from the three-flight climb.

Petra also noticed the black bag and felt at ease with the psychiatrist. The psychiatrist was a big man, over six feet, with large hands and a voice that wanted to get everything over with. He asked Petra, do you hear noises in your head? Petra said yes. He asked, do you hear a lot of noises? Petra said yes. Petra told him how she lived on aspirin. The doctor asked her, do you take sleeping

pills? Petra said she couldn't sleep. The doctor asked, do you want to kill your baby? Petra said, I love my baby. The doctor asked, do you want to kill your baby? Petra said, I love my baby but I think I want to kill her.

The doctor made a note in his book. He felt Petra's pulse. He shined a flashlight into her eyes.

"Would you like to go to a hospital?" the doctor asked.

"What you say, doctor, what you say. I don't want to kill my baby, I love my baby, I love my baby, I love my baby."

The doctor went out to the hall telephone. He telephoned the police. In ten minutes two policemen in full uniform came up the three flights. A policeman seen up close is as formidable as a loaded shotgun. The thick leather belt, the clanging steel handcuffs, the thick black notebook, the blunt bullets, the heavy hanging holster, the butt end of the pistol.

"Where is she?" one of the policemen asked me.

I pointed to Petra's door. "Inside. She's changing her dress for the hospital."

"Inside, hell, the nut can throw herself out of the window." He pounded on the door.

Petra opened the door. She turned white and began to rock on her feet when she saw the police. The two policemen filled the room. They asked questions that went into their black book. The door opened, two more police entered with two ambulance attendants. Petra was limp. The two attendants took her by the arm. "Not to Bellevue" was all that she could say.

Alida sprang toward her mother. She buried herself in her mother. She sank on her mother. She let out a terrible scream.

"Jesus, what're we going to do with the kid?" one of the attendants asked.

"I can take care of the kid," I told the attendant.

"All right then, let's get going."

We started out of the room, four police, the two attendants, Petra, Alida, and myself. I was planning on taking Alida over to East Harlem. Petra had a friend who always looked after Alida, and I knew the friend. I asked the ambulance driver to drop me off with Alida on Park Avenue and 127th Street. He said it would cost me a buck.

Petra collapsed when she saw the ambulance. She had to be placed on a stretcher.

The ambulance turned up Broadway to 106th Street to head crosstown to the East Side. The streets didn't look familiar. I didn't recognize 106th Street. I didn't know where we were when we turned into 116th Street. The sidewalks were slanted upward. It may have been Petra's face. By now her face was the color of ash. Her hands lay limp. Her feet were stuck up in the air. Her head dropped to the side like a broken doll. She didn't speak. Her eyes were open. But they were only open to God.

Petra came to when the ambulance stopped on East 127th Street and Park Avenue. Alida flung herself again on her mother and wouldn't let go. I had to drag Alida away. Petra was too broken to protest. I gave the ambulance driver a dollar and then took Alida up to Mrs. Romanita Morales' three-room cold-water flat where Alida would eat rice and beans until Bellevue made its decision about Petra.

I felt drenched from the ambulance ride. I left Alida with Mrs. Morales and told her that Petra would probably be out of the hospital in a few days. Bellevue seldom

keeps a patient for more than ten days of observation. Alida sat on the green-and-purple sofa and played with her rubber doll. Mrs. Morales' apartment was steaming. She didn't have any of the windows open. The elevated tracks of the New York Central Railroad looked into her living room. An enormous RCA television set filled one side of the room. The set was tuned to a daytime give-away program. One woman from Seattle had just won a \$750 fishing outfit. Mrs. Morales offered me coffee. But my head was ready to burst open. I left Mrs. Morales as soon as I felt she understood what had happened to Petra.

Park Avenue near East 127th Street is about the ugliest stretch of blocks in New York. The only spot I know more ugly is the corner of 126th Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

I walked up Park Avenue to 125th Street and had a frankfurter and a slice of pizza pie for lunch. I ordered a beer and sat down in a dark-stained oak booth. Pictures of prize fighters in stiff anatomical poses decorated the walls. Men spit into spittoons and ate sandwiches with thick chunks of yellowish fat. The room wasn't air-conditioned and a huge fan whirled in the humidity. I was trembling from the ambulance ride. The ambulance drivers had handled Petra like a corpse.

I left the beer and pizza pie and the frankfurter soaked in cold sauerkraut and telephoned the Chester. I asked for Figueroa's room.

I heard the girl's questioning voice. "Is this Mr. Phillips?"

"Yes."

"I was waiting for you all morning."

"An emergency came up. Look, I'll be up to your place in about an hour. Is Figueroa there?"

"No. He didn't stay here last night." I felt good that I was wrong about Figueroa staying in the room.

I got on the 125th Street crosstown bus and sat by an open window. The air was thick with oily fumes but at least it had a rush, a flow, it didn't hang dripping around in an open collar. 125th Street is the dead center of Harlem. And when you ride down 125th Street on a humid August day, you see that it is more than the physical dead center of Harlem. It is the dead physical heart of Harlem. Harlem requires no apologists. No specialists from S.C.A.D. counting how many Negro barbers there are compared to Puerto Rican barbers. Harlem is ugly, rotten, decaying, just because it wants to be ugly, rotten. It is Harlem's only way of resisting the final closing of the actual steel walls that enclose it. To paint the store fronts, to wash the windows, to plant flowers, to sweep the sidewalks, to wash the stoops would mean an acceptance of Harlem as home. The Negroes I knew in Harlem didn't think of Harlem as home but as a trap. And why admit the trap had been sprung? I always looked at the gaping mouth of the Triborough Bridge as the jaws of the trap. The Hudson River and the Triborough Bridge are the two boundaries of 125th Street. In between runs the double line of credit furniture stores with their monstrous display windows, extending to 116th Street and Third Avenue, the greatest concentration of junk and fraud in America. 125th Street is the dirtiest street in New York. If you don't believe me, then walk its length.

Zeussa greeted me with his desk manager's smile. I think he lived on black coffee and onion rolls. He once told me that he hadn't eaten an egg in twenty years.

"What are you doing out in this heat?" he asked me. "Go to an air-conditioned movie. Have a Coke on me." He went to the Coca-Cola machine and dropped in two dimes. "I used to drink fifteen bottles of this stuff a day. The things I used to do. I once walked to Coney Island on a bet. All along the water. Fifteen years ago I used to torture myself for not having built a house in Bay Ridge. Now I don't torture myself. I don't have to. Running this place is torture enough. If I had known that I would end my life staying in this dump fifteen hours a day, I would have taken a Civil Service exam to work in the post office." Zeussa treated me to every confidence except his income.

"You know," Zeussa finally told me, "I have two roomers in Figueroa's room. What am I talking about? Three. That son of a bitch made a baby. I sometimes wonder what kind of a God we really have. When do I start charging double rent?"

"She can't stay in the room," I told Zeussa.

"In the meanwhile she's there."

"Figueroa told me that he doesn't want to live with her, so she'll probably have to move out."

"Is she on welfare too?"

"Not yet."

"Who works in this city?"

"You and me. Do you know anything about the girl?" I asked Zeussa.

"First she came in without a belly, then she had a belly,

then she didn't have a belly. She never said two words to me at the desk. I had a little pity on her because she went to the trouble of buying a gold wedding band and because she was sleeping with Figueroa. I figured anyone who got caught up with him could use it."

"Do you have a room for her?"

"She'd need a double room for the baby. And a room with a kitchenette, a refrigerator. That I don't have. Look," Zeussa told me, "why don't you tell her to just get on a subway and ride. Any place she gets to will be better than this."

"Everybody wishes it was just that easy." Zeussa looked at me as though I had kicked him in the stomach. The dark gent also perched on his shoulder. He rocked a little like Petra when the police came into her room. I knew he knotted his ties too tightly. That his shirts were too clean. That his wrist watch had too much gold in the band.

"Look," Zeussa said, "you went to college. You know all about this psychoanalysis stuff. What's in it?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do they do? Are they like doctors? Do you go to them like you go to a doctor for a hernia?"

"They're doctors. The good ones cut out what's bothering you. They're trained to understand all of the problems that keep people on edge. Sometimes the problems are so serious that a person cracks up. They can't even tie their shoelaces. Sometimes the problem isn't so serious, but still the person can't tie his shoelaces."

"I went to my doctor about a pain in my stomach and he told me I have to see a psychoanalyst. I thought they

were only for crazy people. I didn't sleep for a week, even with his pills. I know I can go crazy from business, but not crazy like crazy people."

"Did you go to the psychoanalyst?"

"My doctor arranged for it. But I haven't gone yet."

"Go," I told Zeussa. "The worst it can do is cost you money. Never ignore a doctor's advice, you know that, the best you can expect then is the worst."

"Yes," said Zeussa, "a bell rings in our heads, we all know what to do, but how many of us listen to the bell." The telephone rang and Zeussa went to answer it as though I no longer existed.

I got into the elevator with Mrs. Cooper. She was ninety-two years old and she still lived alone in a furnished room. She did her own shopping and cooking and her only convenience in life was the fact that she had a toilet in her room. Her face was deeply wrinkled but she stood straight and walked like a person who had not yet been crippled. She often quarreled with Zeussa and I loved to see her borrow from him. "Can you give me a dollar till check day and not a day sooner. You have to, you know. I don't have any left." Zeussa once told me, "She I don't charge six for five."

Mrs. Cooper nodded hello to me and I saw her eyes whiten. She reached for my arm. I held her up. She held tightly to my arm. It was about 94 degrees on the outside, about 100 in the elevator.

"Take her up to her room, quick," I told the elevator operator.

"It's just the heat," she told me, "the heat."

"You shouldn't go down in this heat."

"I know. But they stole my radio. They took my radio."

I led Mrs. Cooper into her room. She kept her room as clean as a monk's cell. She had a small black fan that was older than the Chester. But it whirled and moved the humid air. I got Mrs. Cooper a glass of water. She sat on the edge of her bed. Her hands were trembling. She was beginning to get the furrowed skin of a newborn infant. She had some crackers on her night table and a jar of Skippy peanut butter.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. It was just the heat. I shouldn't have gone out. I get such a pounding now in my heart. Such a terrible pounding." She put her hands to her chest and I could almost see the flow of her blood through her arms.

"Do you want a doctor?" I asked.

"No," she said, "doctors aren't for me any more."

"You should be in a nursing home!"

"No, it's just the heat and the pounding. I'll be all right. They shouldn't have stolen my radio. I told Mr. Zeussa to get me a new lock. I just have to sit still and I'll be all right."

I left Mrs. Cooper sitting on her bed. She didn't want a doctor and it was too much of an effort for her to talk. She had nothing to say. Only the enormity of her age gave her grace. She had been abandoned by her parents in 1869 and since 1869 she had always lived in somebody else's home. Now she had her own home. And she wouldn't give it up for a thousand nursing homes and their Friday night chow mein suppers.

I walked down two flights to get to Figueroa's room. The stairs had puddles of urine. Mrs. Cortez' boy Ramos was peeing against the wall. I didn't blame him for peeing against the wall because the toilet was foul. But I told

him not to pee against the wall but in a pot. His skin was as white as the recluses I saw. He never saw the daylight except on check day when his mother went out to shop. He lived in the hallways and toilets. And what dreams he conjured up not even R.L.S. could imagine. He was three years old. He wore a washed-out undershirt and underpants. I picked him up and carried him back to his mother's room. The room was empty. There was a pot of rice boiling on the two-burner gas stove.

"Mrs. Cortez!"

Ramos began to cry.

"Where's your mother?"

"Mama, mama" was all that he said.

"Where?"

I turned off the pot of boiling rice.

"Mrs. Cortez!"

I walked out into the hallway and knocked on the door of the toilet. The door was ajar, the toilet empty. I looked into the community kitchen. Mr. Stevens was pan-frying two pork chops. He was eighty-one years old and lived on pork chops. He bought the cheapest pork chops and the burning fat smelled like boiling vomit.

Mr. Stevens smiled at me and said, "Lunch." I had asked him a hundred times if he wanted a restaurant allowance but he always told me that he wouldn't eat in restaurants, that he didn't trust their food.

I went back into the hallway and called out, "Mrs. Cortez!"

This time she answered. "Here, here."

She came hurrying up the stairs.

"Where in the hell were you?" I asked.

"Outside." She pointed to a package of powdered milk.

"Don't leave the boy alone and don't leave a pot boiling when you go out," I told her.

"Yes, yes," she said, "I won't."

"Don't do it! Don't even say you won't do it. Just don't do it! Understand?" She gave me a dumb smile.

I walked down the next flight and knocked on Figueroa's door. The girl answered the door. She wore a pink nylon housecoat with red roses printed on the fabric. She had made up her face. She wore a pair of blue slippers. She looked worried. I walked into the room. The bed sheet was pulled taut. She had the baby lying in the center of the bed. The baby was asleep. The Jersey sun was pouring into the room. In the bright yellow sun I could see that the baby had a light skin. At least it had one genetic advantage in the jungle it was preparing to enter. A white skin in a black world conferred camouflage. An instant of indecision. The fleeting instant was more than was granted to the inheritor of the black skin.

The baby awoke just as I sat down in the wicker chair by the window. This time the girl politely turned her back to me as she prepared to nurse the baby.

4 I had expected to see her ripe brown breast. It would have been one of the more pleasant sights of the day.

"What did you eat for supper last night?" I asked.

"Frankfurters again."

"Is Figueroa staying with his mother?"

"No, he's with a friend up in the East Bronx."

"I hear you didn't get to your mother's last night."

She put her baby across her pink dressing gown for burping.

"Mr. Phillips," she told me, "it won't do any good. My mother is frightened. Do you know what it is to live on welfare for seven years? You start to get frightened of every knock on the door, because you're frightened of the checks stopping."

"The checks never stop unless there's a good reason."

"But my mother doesn't think that way."

"I can explain it to her."

"You can try."

"I have to talk to her if you apply for assistance."

"Then you'll know what I mean."

"What's this with your mother?" I asked. "Just explain it to me." She didn't like my outburst. And she couldn't understand my outburst. My anger came from all of my friends who were making \$25,000 a year listening to boys and girls talking about their mamas as though they never got off the pot.

"All right," I said, "let's not go into your family now. Just tell me this. Do you still want to apply for assistance?"

"I don't want to, but I have to."

"All right then. The first thing you have to do is to sign this application form. Then you have to sign this resource form. Do you have any insurance, bank accounts, property, stocks, bonds, union membership?"

"No."

"Didn't you ever open a bank account?"

"No."

"We'll use the Chester as your present address. Unless you know a building that you'd like to move into."

"I know a nice building on West End Avenue but you need two weeks' rent in advance and a week's security."

"I can pay for just about everything except a security deposit on a furnished room. But a room is no trouble on the West Side. A clean room may be some trouble. And a room free from dope pushers may be more trouble."

She had just finished burping the baby and was now wrapping the baby up in a cotton blanket.

"I'm not on the stuff," she said. Flatly, so that I would know. She used her East Harlem voice. "I know something about dope pushers, Mr. Phillips. There was one on every floor of our building. The kids in the neighborhood had

shooting parties up on the roof. The police used to raid the roof three times a week but they never caught anyone. The kids on the block had spotters on all the roofs. On every roof, Mr. Phillips, you had shooting parties. The peddlers used to wait for me when I came home from work. I had the pushers after me ever since I was thirteen years old. I once tried some pot but that was when I was fifteen and never again. The real stuff I never tried. And believe me, Mr. Phillips, I had every kind of pusher, from the kind that try to grab you in the hallways to the guys who can talk all-so-so-so in Harlem. I guess I just didn't like needles."

"Is your mother on narcotics?"

"Just once in a while. When a friend comes up for a shooting. She can't afford it and she can't make it the other way."

"What about Figueroa?"

"He tells me that he doesn't touch the stuff."

"Do you believe him?"

"He hasn't touched anything since I've been staying with him."

"He could go into the bathroom."

"I would know."

"How long have you been with him?" With him. I think the abstract mention of Figueroa startled her. She couldn't have known it but I was beginning what is called a pending investigation. A detailed history of her life, her relatives, her friends, Figueroa, her employers, teachers, of anyone she knew or had known who might have some bearing on her eligibility to receive public assistance. Actually, the fact that she had no money and was unable to work because of the baby, almost automatically, put

her on assistance. You don't let women and babies starve on the streets of New York. But if you're as old as I am, you already know that you pay a price for everything and usually you pay the full market price. There aren't any bargains. Just accidents. That's what my mother always told me when I told her about my shopping exploits on Third Avenue. My mother knew that in the time it took me to find a fifty-cent water color on Third Avenue I could have written *War and Peace* ten times. And the investigation doesn't stop with the pending investigation. It continues and continues as long as you remain on assistance. Some women are driven to hysteria by the questioning. But they're usually the ones who lie.

The girl sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, no longer able to take comfort in the baby, for the baby was asleep. The baby slept swaddled in the cotton blanket but with its arms outstretched. The baby looked like a cross. Particularly with the sun coming through Figueroa's sooted windows. The sun fell on the infant. I think the Greeks failed because they didn't worship the infant. But I wouldn't want to prove the thesis. In the infant there is always a beginning. It is life. And just remember that we still don't know how life comes to us and we don't know a damn thing about death. That means I don't know and you don't know. I did know one thing. At least I felt it in my humid bones. In my voice that began to tremble. It always trembles when I get serious. When I feel I'm talking to a person. It is the most extraordinary occurrence on earth to feel suddenly aware of a person. To sense they're alive. As I would say, really alive. If you don't believe me, then think back over your hallowed life. That's what I felt about this girl. That she wanted

to survive. To take her chances. That she had made an election. Whether she did or not, I didn't know. Maybe I was doing it for her. I made a silent I hope not and told her what I was about to do.

"Look, when a person applies for assistance we have what we call an investigation. That means an investigation of your eligibility to receive assistance. To be eligible to receive assistance means that you have no money, really no money, and that you have no resources, and that you have no relatives or friends who are able to assist you. It also means a thorough investigation of your background, your employment, schooling, and of course Figueroa. You know the kind of questions the investigator would ask your mother. Well, your mother was on assistance for so long that the investigator didn't really have to ask her anything, he just had to see that she was alive. I have to start from the beginning with you, do you understand?"

"Yes."

The yes was frightened. She held onto her baby's hand as though they were both going to be flung into outer space.

"What is your father's name?"

"Reese Fletcher."

"Your mother's name?"

"Eaton."

"Where is your father now?"

"I don't know."

"When did you last see your father?"

"I don't remember. I don't think I ever saw my father."

"What did your mother tell you about him?"

"Only that he was white. That he lived in Ohio for a

time. Then moved to Chicago. Then she lost track of him."

"Did they live together?"

"I think so."

"Where?"

"I think it was in Ohio."

"Where were you born?"

"I was born in Ohio."

"When?"

"March 23, 1938."

"Where was your mother born?"

"New Orleans."

"Is your mother Negro?"

"She's Negro but she has white blood in her. My father was white. All white."

"What do you consider yourself?"

"My mother told me to consider myself all Negro. She said you're black, honey, and you won't be able to fool anyone. So just be black."

"You don't look Negro."

"I'm taken for white or Spanish most of the time."

"So what do you consider yourself?"

"Negro."

"When did you come to New York?"

"About eight years ago."

"Did you always live at the same address, 103rd Street?"

"We always lived in East Harlem."

"Where did you grow up?"

"My mother left me with an aunt. Her name was Mrs. Kenny Bell. She lived in Cleveland, Ohio. She's dead now. I saw her die. She died on the front porch sitting on her swing. They have swings and front porches in Cleveland."

She just went to sleep. I wouldn't have known she was dead, except that she fell forward. She had a big house in Cleveland. She was a fine woman. Her husband had worked all of his life in the post office. She always considered herself a lady. And she wanted me to grow up to be a lady. I had a starched dress for school every morning. We went to church every Sunday and the minister used to come to her house every Friday night for supper. She told me to get a good commercial education if I couldn't go to college. She said she was planning on mortgaging her house to get me started in college. She used to tell me that Negroes weren't worth dirt without an education. She didn't like most Negroes. She didn't like my mother either. She used to tell me to watch out for Negro men. She said they were the worst lot. She said I should be careful about the first man I bedded down with. Because he might be the last for me."

"Did your aunt leave you any property when she died?"

"The house wasn't paid up and she only had her social security and a day's work to live on. I don't know how she ever got me all of those starched dresses unless it was from the people she worked for."

"So you grew up colored?"

"I didn't know anything but colored people. Cleveland's just like New York. The colored people all live together."

"How did your mother treat you when you came to New York?"

"All right."

"New York must have been a shock after Cleveland."

"It was certainly different. But I had seen neighborhoods like East Harlem in Cleveland."

"Did you graduate from high school in New York?"

"Yes."

"Did you work in New York?"

"I started working my last year in high school. I had a Saturday job typing letters for a real-estate man in Harlem. But when I graduated I found a job on 42nd Street in an insurance office."

"No college?"

"No."

"How much did you earn a week?"

"I made \$55 a week. But it all had to go to welfare. The investigator said that my income had to be deducted from my mother's budget. My working didn't leave me with much more money than I had before. But at least it paid back some of the welfare money."

"How long did you work?"

"Until I was in my fifth month."

"Did you have a difficult pregnancy?"

"I was sick most of the time."

"What did your mother say?"

"She went on a long drunk and wouldn't even talk to me. I was going to move out of the house but I felt too sick to be alone. But then she began to take notice of me again and everything was all right until just before I got ready to deliver. Then her screaming and carrying on was too much to take. I moved in with Figueroa."

"How did you both sleep on this bed with you pregnant?"

"We managed."

"Why do you think your mother was so upset by your pregnancy?"

"I think she had a dream of me marrying a colored lawyer or doctor. She said I would look good as a doctor's wife. She said that colored doctors liked to have white-skinned wives. She said the only thing she had been able to give me was a light skin. But she also used to repeat over and over again that I shouldn't forget I was black. She said that all of my babies would be black. She said my white father didn't have strong blood in him. She said all of the baby's blood would come from the black side of me. She used to tell me to stay away from white men unless I wanted to become a prostitute. She said I couldn't have a regular life with a white man. She said the babies would be black and no white man could take a black baby."

"How did you meet Figueroa?"

"Some friends introduced him to me on the corner of 103rd Street. We went together for some coffee and cake and then I started seeing him."

"How long ago was that?"

"About two years ago."

"Did you know Figueroa was on welfare when you met him?"

"No."

"What did you think he did for a living?"

"I didn't know. It didn't occur to me to ask. But he was always well-dressed and he had better manners than most of the men I had seen on the East Side."

"But he wasn't a lawyer or a doctor?"

"No."

"Why were you attracted to him?"

"Mr. Phillips, a girl eighteen doesn't ask those questions. We just started talking and seeing one another. I guess

he knew what to do with me and I wasn't too sure about him."

"Was he the first man to sleep with you?"

"Yes."

"Did he know it?"

"He didn't pay much attention."

"Did you ever live with him for any period of time?"

"Just when I came to his room."

"Did you ever help him out with money?"

"He'd be short a lot of times when we went out."

"Where did you used to go?"

"Different clubs in East Harlem."

"Did you ever go into Harlem?"

"Only when we quarreled once. And I started seeing some older men. They took me to some of the Harlem clubs."

"And college?"

"What—?"

"I don't understand! Your aunt wanted you to go to college. Your mother wanted you to marry a lawyer or a doctor. And the first guy you pick out is Figueroa. Why did you select him? Didn't you meet men at work? Didn't you try to register for night courses? Didn't you try to get around to the ten thousand free lectures they have every night in New York? Didn't you think of going to a movie or a concert instead of a club?"

"I just told you what I remember of my aunt. She was upper-class colored. If she hadn't died sitting in the swing I might have gone to college. But there was no going to college in my mother's house. I told you the welfare took every penny I made and said I had to turn it over to my mother. I couldn't even buy proper clothes for work."

"But you had money to go to clubs with Figueroa?"

"What do you want me to tell you, Mr. Phillips? Tell me and I'll tell you."

"Let's forget about Figueroa for a minute. Tell me what else you know about your father. Did the welfare worker ever locate him? Do you have any idea where he is? You know, sometimes men die and leave all kinds of benefits for their children—insurance policies, veteran benefits, social security, union benefits, fraternal benefits, money in the bank, property, you never know what. What does your mother tell you about your father?"

"Not much, I told you."

"That doesn't mean anything to me. I need some facts that I can try to track down. What was your father's name again?"

"Reese Fletcher."

"How old would he be now?"

"I think about forty-five."

"How does your mother describe him?"

"She said he was very tall, very good-looking, and very white."

"Did she say how they came to be together?"

"She's never told me."

"Did your aunt know your father?"

"No."

"Did you ever hear from your father? Did you ever get a Christmas card, a birthday card?"

"No."

"Did your mother?"

"I don't remember any cards."

"So you never knew your father?"

"No."

"And you've only grown up with women, your aunt and your mother?"

"That's right, Mr. Phillips."

"And the first man you sleep with is Figueroa. Do you intend to stay with him?"

"I know you don't want me to, but I have to stay with him."

"Why?"

"To get him to be the father of my baby. He'll marry me, Mr. Phillips, even if it's only for ten minutes. But I want my baby to have a name. I want her father's name right on the birth certificate."

"You can have that without marrying Figueroa."

"I want it there for real, Mr. Phillips."

"Will he marry you?"

"He won't even look at me now. He can't even wait until I get out of his room. But I'll get him to marry me."

"And if he won't?"

"He'll have to."

"He doesn't have to marry you. But you can get him to admit paternity. That he can either do voluntarily by signing a form or else you can go to the court."

"And the support of the baby?"

"That's determined by the court, or by us, if the father acts voluntarily. But as long as Figueroa is on welfare he doesn't have to worry about any court orders for support."

"He said that he'll find work."

"Look, do you know that Figueroa did five years for selling narcotics?"

"I didn't know it until about three months ago."

"How did you find out?"

"My mother told me."

"Why in the hell didn't she tell you sooner?"

"That's what I asked her."

"And what did your mother say?"

"She said Figueroa told her he'd get her tongue cut out."

"Can he do it?"

"I've seen him with some rough crowd in East Harlem."

"Do you think he's still handling narcotics?"

"No, Mr. Phillips, he's not. He's a scared man when it comes to doing anything that will get him back in jail."

"But he has to make a buck."

"He can do it bartending or selling."

"Or pimping."

The baby shrieked as though its umbilical cord had never been cut. As though it still drew air from its mother. As though its mother's pain was still its pain. As though they were still one body. Which could only be when both were dead. When both were dust. The girl looked like clay. The shriek of the baby broke the cloud over her. She turned her back to me and sobbed. The sobbing was only for the instant. The baby shrieked again and she picked up the baby. The baby was quiet the instant it was picked up. Which is a lesson we never forget throughout life.

"I didn't mean he was pimping," I said. "I meant he might be pimping. He has to do some kind of work. He can't live on the money we give him."

"You don't know him the way I know him, Mr. Phillips. He's used to having people give him things, give him money, buy him drinks, dinner. He never pays for anything. He has a way of asking you for the necktie you're wearing, your sport jacket—that jacket hanging there on the door was given to him by a friend. I know you can't

get through life that way, but right now that seems to be the way he's managing. He doesn't really eat. He has his rent paid."

"He doesn't even get enough money from us to ride the bus crosstown everyday to East Harlem. Do you know that we get special requests for clinic carfare from the hospitals when a person has to spend even thirty cents a week carfare?"

"He knows how to live off the street."

"Then why in the hell do you want to marry him?"

"To give a name to my baby."

"What good will his name do your baby?"

"She'll know in her bones that she had a father. That's enough reason for me to marry Figueroa."

"But right now you have to eat and you need a place to sleep."

"Yes."

5 The girl said yes as though she had agreed to hurl the baby out of the window. One dead battered baby on the Broadway sidewalk might turn some heads from the pizza pie windows. But I knew a thousand battered babies within ten blocks where the sun only existed on TV. Where rats ate the face of Mr. Stewart who lay dead for two days. The rats attacked Mrs. Robinson's two boys when they pushed open Mr. Stewart's door to play. Mr. Stewart used to buy the boys Chiclets. Mrs. Otero called me on the phone at 9:30 one morning to scream out that rats had jumped into her baby's crib.

I looked at Miss Fletcher's baby on the bed. It's neck was red with prickly heat. Figueroa didn't have running water in his room. That only came with the fifteen-dollar rooms.

I asked her, "Do you have a vision for the baby?"

"What?" she asked, but I knew that she heard me.

"Do you know what a vision is?"

"Yes."

"What is a vision then?"

"A vision is what you hope to see."

"What do you hope to see then in your baby?"

"Mr. Phillips, she has a lot of growing to do. I'm the one that has sea water in its mouth. That's what my aunt used to tell me. She almost drowned once in Lake Eric. She said that when she felt all of that water in her mouth drowning her, she spit it out."

"Your aunt seems to have taught you everything except how to stay out of bed with Figueroa."

"He can change too."

The baby had Figueroa's face. The baby's nostrils soaked up all of Figueroa's genes.

"For what?" I asked.

"The way I thought he was when I first met him."

"Did he ever give you a sign of changing? I mean when the baby was on its way. Did he talk about work? About getting out of this place?"

"I talked about it. He didn't."

"Did he ever leave the room in the morning and say he was going out to look for a job?"

"No."

"Did he ever leave the room in the morning and say he was going out to find an apartment with a toilet and a kitchen?"

"No."

"Did he ask you to have an abortion?"

"He suggested it once but I said no. He said it would mean going to the loan sharks and they can be more trouble than a baby."

"Did you want the baby?"

"I didn't know until I had the baby on my breast. Then

I wanted her. Up till then, I didn't know for sure, Mr. Phillips. I was frightened. I'm still frightened. But the baby is more frightened than me. You should see the way she cries when she wants her milk. Mr. Phillips, I'm the only person in the world she can turn to. That means something to me. I haven't had anything mean anything to me until the baby. I've seen plenty of babies in my neighborhood in East Harlem. You smile at them and they laugh or cry, but it doesn't really do anything to you, not unless they're your own. She's only about a month old, Mr. Phillips, but she knows me now. She knows how to put my breast in her mouth. She knows when she's had enough. She needs me to burp her. Maybe I didn't have her the way I would have liked to. But she's born now. That's what I think about when I'm alone in the room with her. She's born. She's alive. I don't know what it really means. But I feel responsible. I mean a responsibility."

"And that includes Figueroa?"

"He's responsible too."

"And I'm responsible for getting you some money so you can buy a crib for the baby and food for the two of you." I stood up, ready to go. I closed my black notebook that didn't have a note in it. Only her father's name.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"And rent money, too."

"No," she said, "I mean to the questioning."

"It's not all to the questioning. You'll be questioned every ninety days as long as you remain on welfare. We'll have to locate your father, talk to your mother, get Figueroa to sign some papers he might object to signing, we'll have to get hold of your employers and we'll have to verify the birth of the baby. And I'll have to find out why you

really can't stay in your mother's house. Maybe your reason isn't good enough, maybe your mother's isn't good enough. Maybe Figueroa will get a job tomorrow and buy a house in Queens."

"And about the money?"

"That you get once the case is accepted."

"Are you going to accept my case?" she asked, and I might have been her father or a temple priest.

"Don't worry about your case," I told her. "Worry more about a room. If Figueroa gets back here tonight, then go out and find a room. Any room with water and a clean toilet, preferably one with an inside toilet. And don't worry about the rent. You can pay up to \$90."

She gasped at the \$90 rental—and so did I the first time I read the rent schedules. One person in a furnished accommodation can pay up to \$60 a month, two to three persons can pay up to \$90, and four or more persons can pay \$100 a month, without asking for special permission from downtown to pay more. Rents of \$130 a month are common and I'll tell you about the buildings later.

I left the room just as the baby woke up from its nap. Perhaps it was best that the baby slept through the interview. Babies have a remarkable memory. And this baby didn't need the additional burden of a memory.

Mrs. Mitchell called out my name just as I closed Figueroa's door.

"I've been waiting for you to come out," she said, "I found the stocks you were asking about." Mrs. Mitchell had checked off stocks as one of her resources when she first applied for assistance, and the check mark had been noticed by a State auditor. That meant I had to find out what stock Mrs. Mitchell had in her possession and bring

it into the office for an evaluation. "The stock," she told me, when I first asked her about it, "that's nothing. It's worthless. I just checked it because I'm used to being honest. Even if it never did me any good." Mrs. Mitchell was seventy-one years old and she looked it. Mrs. Mitchell had leased a rooming house on Staten Island. She kept the house without a profit and when she was too old to manage the rooms, she was evicted and her furniture removed by the City of New York. She had tried to sell the furnishings but a dealer only offered her ten dollars. She told me she collapsed after the ten-dollar offer. She managed to keep her maple bed. A four-poster pineapple bed that she squeezed into her room at the Chester.

Mrs. Mitchell asked me to come into her room to get the stock certificates.

The bed took up most of the room. There wasn't much space between the wall and the bed. But she had squeezed in a small refrigerator and two orange crates stuffed with her old receipts and account books. "When you've been in business," she told me, "you can never tell when you'll have to answer some questions." The bed was her grave. She had two mattresses piled on the box spring. Pillows were lined against the wall and piled up at the head of the bed. A brilliant patchwork quilt was folded at the foot of the bed. The tops of the posters were carved pineapples. And seated in the center of the bed was Mindy.

The dog growled as I entered the room. The dog always growled. But it seldom left its pillow on the bed. The dog had been with Mrs. Mitchell for ten years. And she spoke to the dog in a voice that I am certain is used throughout the universe.

"He won't bite," Mrs. Mitchell said. "He likes to think that he's protecting me." She went to one of the orange crates and took out six large stock certificates. I unfolded the certificates and saw they were shares in a Hungarian mineral venture. The six certificates were for \$300. The certificates were dated 1923. "They're worthless," she said, "but you said you wanted to see them. I knew I had them somewhere among these papers. I got into the habit of never throwing out anything that looks official."

"Sometimes these stocks are worth a fortune," I said.

"Don't you think I asked about them ten years ago?"

"I'll let them look at it downtown."

"Can't they look at me instead?" Mrs. Mitchell asked. She sat down on the bed next to her dog, taking him around, forgetting the dog was almost as old as she, holding the dog like a child.

"What do you need?" I asked Mrs. Mitchell. "Tell me and I'll get it."

"You sent me the money for the winter underwear and that I bought. I also bought myself some galoshes and a warm bathrobe. But it's from day to day. The money doesn't last. Can't I get some more money?"

"There's no way," I said.

"But you know what I get for food." Her allowance for food was about \$14 every fifteen days, or every semi-monthly period as we figured it. The home economists determined that this was the minimum amount of money necessary to maintain Mrs. Mitchell in food for fifteen days. Not the necessary amount, not an adequate amount, but the minimum, or what is known as the subsistence level.

"Look at this book," Mrs. Mitchell told me. She opened a ruled notebook. On each page was the day of the week and the money spent.

"This is what I spent on Mindy. I keep track just to make certain that he gets his share of the food. You see I'm spending fifty and sixty cents a day on Mindy. Do you know what keeps me alive? Your surplus food. That food you give away." Tens of thousands of families in New York City were receiving surplus food. The food was given away to people on assistance. The surplus food consisted of butter, cheese, powdered milk, and corn flour. The amount was determined by the size of the family. The food was distributed automatically by IBM cards. The families had to take the cards to a food depot, usually a big warehouse or armory, and pick up their food.

Mrs. Mitchell opened the door of her refrigerator. She took out some corn bread wrapped in wax paper.

"This is what I live on, and the cheese. And this doesn't last."

I didn't know what to tell Mrs. Mitchell. I took the stock certificates and left her room.

Zeussa called me over to the manager's desk just as I left the elevator. He seemed to be waiting for me. His face expectant, the words formed. I wanted to excuse myself but he wouldn't let me go. He had a secret to tell and he had chosen this moment to tell the secret.

"Look," he said, "I don't want this to go any further than between you, me, and whoever else has to know."

"What?" I asked. Zeussa made it a point never to tell me any information about his tenants. What good will it do, he told me, I'll tell you and three days later I'll have a

knife in me. I knew a landlord on West 84th Street who got his face slashed with a razor, and the slashers held the razor at his throat for ten minutes debating whether he should die, the landlord sold his property and bought a laundermat in Queens.

"About Figueroa."

"What about him?" I asked.

"This doesn't go any further?"

"Look," I told Zeussa, "I don't give a damn about Figueroa. If the bastard is working, we'll find it out. If he's peddling dope, the Federal men will grab him. If he still carries a gun, the New York police will get him. Don't get yourself into trouble over him."

"As long as I know it, you should know it too. Let's share the secret."

"What about him then?"

"He leaves his room every night about eleven and comes back about seven in the morning."

"Which means that he's working."

"Which means that he shouldn't be getting welfare."

"If he's working, then why didn't he buy the baby a dozen diapers?"

"Look, I have enough trouble figuring out my own life. I just mentioned it because of the girl."

"I don't think he's working or else he'd have a new suit hanging in his closet."

"Then what does he do?"

"I'll ask him. That's the easiest way to find out."

Above Zeussa's head was a calendar with a photograph of a naked girl. The girl looked about twenty years old. She had enormous breasts. She held a mink muff in front

of her thighs. What the hell had led the girl to pose naked with a mink muff in front of her thighs? I asked Zeussa the question. He fled to answer the phone.

I waved goodbye to Zeussa and walked out of the lobby straight into Figueroa.

I was startled to see him on the sidewalk, in the sunlight, dressed in a suit, looking like every other person on the sidewalk. I had only seen him in his pajamas. I had only seen him in his room.

Figueroa had on a blue suit too warm for the humid weather. I immediately reasoned that he couldn't get up \$25 to buy a polished cotton suit on 14th Street.

Figueroa smiled at me as though we had made an agreement not to meet outside of his room. He had an auctioneer's skill for appraising the instant.

"I didn't recognize you in clothes," I said.

"That's because I'm a case to you," Figueroa said, surprising me again.

"I've been talking to Miss Fletcher."

"That's why I stayed away today."

"She has a case, you know," I said.

"More than you know," Figueroa told me. "Can we sit down somewhere?" he asked.

I pointed to the benches on Broadway. The benches on Broadway are the second most ugly sight in New York. The benches are lined up at the cross streets, traffic going in both directions. The air is foul with bus fumes. I could never guess who the people were who sat on the benches until I began going into the Broadway buildings. And then I saw they were my clients. They sat for hours, either silently outstaring death or if they were lucky, they became involved in gossip. Just as Figueroa and I were go-

ing to become involved in gossip. Gossip has calmed more souls than the Sermon on the Mount.

"Tell me what you know," I said to Figueroa.

"Are you going to put her on?"

"I'll have to, unless you can start supporting the two of them. I don't want to put her on. I think it will turn her into a dog."

"She'll make it," Figueroa said.

"Not if she lives on the West Side. Can't you get on a subway and find her a room in Jamaica? The welfare money is good anywhere in New York, not only on these blocks on the West Side."

"You don't realize it," Figueroa told me, "but this neighborhood is like a dream for her. Look at these buildings. These aren't slum buildings. These are first-rate buildings. You even still see some first-rate people in this neighborhood, professional looking people, people who don't look as though they're getting welfare. You see men carrying brief cases, women wheeling new baby carriages and you know there's a husband in the picture. That's what Kenny wants. A neighborhood like this, where nobody asks any questions, because nobody knows anyone else. If you dress, which Kenny does, and if you don't look like a fish, then you're in, at least on the outside."

"And how long will she stay clean?"

"That's up to her."

"What about you?"

"I've had it with her. I'll lay her on occasion because she really loves it."

Figueroa knew he had selected the most apt words in the English language to turn a woman into flesh. But I didn't let him know it. I asked, "Why shouldn't she?"

Figueroa chose to ignore my question. He watched the cars coming up Broadway, all of them with a destination. For an instant he glanced at the Chester, up to the windows of his room, then he turned toward me.

"Have you talked to her mother yet?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"But you will?"

"Probably tomorrow."

"Okay, then don't believe a word that she tells you."

"Why not?"

"Because I laid the mother before I got to Kenny."

"You don't have any children by the mother?"

"Look," Figueroa said, "don't get funny." His voice had a threat—and Figueroa looked even more real.

"I wasn't being funny," I said, "it's just something I should know."

"No," Figueroa said, "no. No babies."

I think I dampened the enthusiasm with which Figueroa intended to tell me that he had slept with the girl's mother. But that was my intention. I wanted the details so that I could interpret the enthusiasm.

"How long have you known the mother?"

"About a year and a half."

"Did you sleep with her before or after you slept with Miss Fletcher?"

"Before and after."

"Does Miss Fletcher know?"

"No."

"You mean she doesn't know, or it's something that's just not talked about?"

"She doesn't know. Unless her mother told her."

"Which she might have."

"Which she will probably do now."

"Why did you sleep with the mother when you had the girl?"

"The mother just made herself easy. Wait till you see her. She's beautiful and coal black. She looks dirty on the outside. She wears a housecoat that hasn't been washed in ten years. But naked you don't see it. She's like a snake all coiled up. She once showed me how she uncoiled for her white husband. I wanted to show him, she told me, that there wasn't any black or white. She showed him. I think he left her because he couldn't top her in bed. You'd have to be a bull."

Figueroa caught me appraising him.

"No, I'm not a bull. I just got in because it was easy. Once when I was waiting for Kenny to get home from work. Her mother slipped off the housecoat and said we had an hour and twenty minutes."

"She doesn't hustle?"

"She could but she doesn't. She's not the type to hustle. Hustling is work, you know, it's a business. Her only work is being sick that she gave everything to a white man."

"How does she say it?"

"She'll tell you. Outside of taking off the housecoat, that's her only other pleasure in life."

"What can you tell me that she won't tell me?" I asked Figueroa.

"She doesn't have any secrets," Figueroa said. "Her whole life has been welfare and this white bastard who left her."

"Do you know anything about the father?"

"You'd better talk to her about him. What about the girl?" Figueroa asked. "Are you going to put her on?"

"What about the baby?" I asked Figueroa. The question caught Figueroa like a rabbit punch. He slumped on the bench, coughing. A fire engine came screeching down Broadway. A monstrous hook and ladder came charging at us. Figueroa spit up blood on the pavement.

"There's a fire in me," he said, coughing and spitting, "the trucks don't come screeching. Only that son of a bitch sits and waits." Figueroa pointed to a Cadillac hearse waiting for the trucks to pass. "What the hell is that lousy forty bucks every two weeks that you send me. Let me cough in your face a couple of times and then you'll see what forty dollars means."

"The clinic said you're okay."

"I saw them two months ago."

"Then why don't you go back?"

"Then they'll bury me again in a hospital."

"This way you'll give the kid, the girl, and everybody else TB."

"I'll go. I'll go in the morning. Maybe I just need some needles. I've been putting it off till the girl got settled."

Figueroa sat back on the bench, opening his jacket, undoing the two top buttons. His shirt was nylon. In the humidity it probably felt like sheet metal. He loosened his tie.

"Why in the hell does anybody remain in this town?" he asked me. "What's it for? I used to think about this place when I was in Dannemora. I'd lay out the streets in my mind. I'd see all the avenues stretching from the Battery up into Harlem. I'd see the two rivers and the ocean. I'd see the city just the way it's shown on the subway maps. All straight lines and right angles. I'd pinpoint my

mother's house. 105th Street off Broadway. I'd pinpoint everybody's house that I knew and I couldn't figure out what any one of them was doing in this city. But this New York is it," Figueroa said. "This is like putting on your first pair of long pants. You never take them off again."

Figueroa took off his jacket. His shirt was wet. He wiped his face with a folded white handkerchief. He showed me the handkerchief.

"Look at the dirt that comes off your face. A guy I know who works as a street cleaner told me that six tons of soot a day fall on every square mile in New York. No wonder I can't breathe."

"How sick are you?" I asked Figueroa.

"I could lay down now and die and not miss the next fifty years."

"Look, I asked you a minute ago about the baby. Don't you see the baby as yours, as somebody you have to look after, as somebody absolutely unique. that came straight out of you in a way that nobody can explain, that needs a father—"

"I just laid Kenny, I'm not a father."

"You're a father now."

"I don't see it."

"All right then, let's make you a father on paper." I opened my notebook and took out some forms 384b that I had in the slip envelope. The form 384b is an acknowledgment of paternity and an agreement to support. The putative father signs the forms and thereby admits that he is the father and that he has a responsibility to support the child according to his ability to do so. It's a simple form and most men sign it without question. Some protest

and go into the Special Sessions Court to deny paternity. How does a man prove that he's not the father? I think it often depends on what the judge had for breakfast.

Figueroa glanced at the form and signed it after I filled in the details.

"Now you're a father," I told Figueroa.

"On paper," he reminded me.

And I agreed.

6 I got on the Amsterdam Avenue bus in the morning, remembering my extravagant curiosity about death. Do we die or don't we die?

Who is there to tell us with certainty? If only some of us died and others didn't, as the Frenchman suggested, then death would be horrible. I also thought, how many men wake in the morning and look at themselves in awe, saying, I didn't die during the night, I'm alive, what am I going to do now with this extraordinary gift? I was thinking of Figueroa. After I left Figueroa on Broadway, I saw a man shot by the police, slumped on the sidewalk, two holes in his head, blood on the sidewalk. It was 4:30 in the afternoon and a curious crowd looked at the dead man as though he had never had life. The Arabs are right in calling death the great separator. A dead man is quickly thrust from our sight. And if we do think of him, it is not the fact that the man is dead which occupies us, but that we don't know what to think.

The bus was heavy with Negro cleaning women. They

sat with their great plastic pocketbooks as though they were going to a funeral. They didn't chatter but looked straight ahead toward the one bright day in their lives: their own funeral. The bus stopped in front of City College. You could see that this part of New York had once been high peaks and valleys. City College looked down over the valley of Harlem. The Amsterdam Avenue hill rose and dipped into a divide. The Hudson River swept in at 125th Street and it was necessary to lift the subway train out of the ground and run it high above the valley. The copper roofs of Columbia had a dull green Victorian finish. Columbia was desperately trying to preserve its land. It helped set up a block of terraced co-operative apartments to buttress itself against the slabs of public housing. This was the Athenian hill of New York. But Harlem called it the pit. You forget that New York was once covered with trees and soft earth. That the land had sweep. That the sky could be seen everywhere and not just from Riverside Drive. But above 125th Street you could still see the shape of the land. And what was planted on the land sat beside me on the bus.

I got off the bus at Third Avenue and 103rd Street. Don't let me describe 103rd Street. Take an afternoon off and walk the blocks in the 100's. But do it quickly, before more projects come to hide the visible. I stopped on the corner where Miss Fletcher said she had first met Figueroa. And then I turned into her mother's house.

I had grown accustomed to the broken mailboxes where the names piled up like junked cars. The hallways that smelled of urine and pork. But I could never get accustomed to fat lumbering rats with enlarged stomachs who

looked as though they had just swallowed a baby whole. They're sickening. Mice can be sweet. But rats are rats. And I saw a fat lumbering rat just as I entered the hallway. The rat squeezed into the wall and I pretended I hadn't seen it. The rats must have fled from excavated land of the public housing sites into the remaining buildings. Where else could they go, except into the East River? And New York had no Pied Piper.

I knocked on Mrs. Fletcher's door. I heard the police lock scraping on the floor. The door opened on the kitchen.

Mrs. Fletcher stood in the doorway and I looked for the daughter in the mother.

Mrs. Fletcher wore the housecoat Figueroa described. It was dirty. And her body moved naked under it.

Her skin was black. Coal black as Figueroa had described it. That black black which is the only black recognized by other Negroes as black. The black gave Mrs. Fletcher an unbroken line.

Her voice was Southern. Southern with the Negro accent. Which is perpetuated in Harlem because most Negro kids never hear anyone but other Negroes. The few who go to private schools shed the accent only to carry it inside of themselves. Listen the next time you speak to a Negro. And listen the next time you hear two Negroes speaking. And you will add ten thousand more years to the integration process.

I don't know why Mrs. Fletcher made me think as I did, unless it was her blackness. She forced you to see that she was black. We don't really see Negroes as black. Negroes simply exist for us as whip hands. For in the countries

where they don't exist as whip hands, they exist as Negroes.

Mrs. Fletcher invited me into the living room. The furniture wouldn't have brought ten dollars at the Goodwill. I saw an ash tray on the cocktail table the girl must have bought on a trip to the Village. A ceramic ash tray with a bulging nude. I looked for other signs of the girl in the room. I could only guess that the Van Gogh print belonged to her. I looked for photographs of the father. But the only other decoration was a calendar from a meat market.

I started with the father.

"When did you last see Mr. Fletcher?"

"About fifteen years ago. I don't know for certain. But it's all in the record. I've been answering these questions for years."

I had hoped that her voice would be as unbroken as her skin. But she had spoken too long for the record. And when you've spoken long enough for the record your voice takes on the feigned tiredness of a boy who refuses to run again to the corner grocery for his mother. I'd often wondered why we stayed young for so long. And now I was just beginning to find out. It's the only true blameless period of our lives. But I didn't come to Mrs. Fletcher to learn what I could know.

"Where did you last see him?" I asked, and with an edge, so that she might realize she wasn't speaking for the record but for her daughter.

"In Cleveland."

"Where in Cleveland?"

"Do you know Cleveland?"

"I need an address," I said.

"He never had an address."

"But you had to see him somewhere. You lived with him in Cleveland?"

"It wasn't living any more."

"Did you stay in the same room together?"

"Yes."

"Where was the room?"

"On Prospect Avenue."

"Where on Prospect Avenue?"

"A hotel, but I don't remember the name. And it wouldn't tell you anything about him. We were only there for a couple of weeks."

"But you lived in Cleveland for a while. Your daughter Kenny was born in Cleveland. Where did you live for the longest period?"

"Those houses are down. They have a parking lot there now."

"All right, tell me what you know about Mr. Fletcher."

"How do you mean?"

"How tall was he?"

"About six feet."

"Thin or heavy?"

"Thin."

"Was he ever in the Army or Navy?"

"Not that I knew."

"Did you know any of his relatives?"

"Not a one."

"Do you know where he was born?"

"Chicago, he said."

"Where did you meet him?"

"In Cleveland."

"How?"

"I was working then in a restaurant on Euclid Avenue."

We started talking. He knew places where we could go. And when Kenny came, he paid the bills. Till one day when I just didn't see him again."

"Where did he work? What kind of work did he do?"

"I never knew. I think he was working in Cleveland for a Chicago outfit selling automobile parts."

"Do you think he just left Cleveland and went back to his job in Chicago?"

"I don't know what to think. He just left like I knew he would."

"What kind of a man was he? Did he dress well, did he speak well, did he go off to work everyday, what was he?"

"I was with him like my daughter was with Figueroa. She didn't ask any questions. She didn't know anything about Figueroa except his name! She just bedded down with him. That's what I did in Cleveland. I didn't know from day to day when he would leave me. But from day to day I knew I was being taken care of. That's all that seemed to count then. And nobody gave me a second chance to think differently." She felt herself being pushed.

"But now we know Figueroa's social security number, his prison record, his family. We could locate him in three weeks if he decided to try to disappear."

"I told you I didn't know Mr. Fletcher was going to disappear. I didn't know then about tomorrow. I still don't know. I live from check to check. What do you want me to tell you about him?"

"Anything that will help me locate him."

"Why do you want to find him when he hasn't tried to find us?"

"Would he know where to look?"

"I haven't seen him if that's what you mean!" Her anger

seemed to be honest and not the anger people direct at themselves when they lie.

"Look, if you had to find him, if it meant the difference between living and dying, would you know where to start?"

"The way I live now I don't see any difference between living and dying. But that's not what you asked. No, I wouldn't know where to look. We didn't have anything going between us. Not for real. Because plenty of white men marry colored girls. He never even once saw that I was colored! The words never came out of his mouth. Not even when we quarreled. He was just one of those men who's on his own. It's as though he made up his mind a long time ago that he was going to die alone in a single ten-dollar-a-week room and he was living his whole life to prove it. He wouldn't rent an apartment or a house, and they were easy to get in Cleveland. Always rooms. Try to find a man like him."

"I couldn't find him the way you mean, but if I had his social security number I could find him in two weeks."

"What good would it do anybody? What if I'm all wrong about him and he's married in Chicago to a white woman and all that goes with it?"

"Then it might not do anybody any good. But I thought your daughter needed a father."

"She did need a father. Now she just needs to get rid of Figueroa!"

"She wants to marry Figueroa."

The mother whimpered. The cry broke loose. She called it up. Summoned like a genie. The cry that breaks in on us when we permit ourselves to look at as simple a phenomenon as tomorrow morning without ourselves in it.

I left Mrs. Fletcher. She wouldn't talk any more. She sat on the couch as helpless as a TV set with the switch turned off.

I walked to Lexington Avenue and rode the bus back to my office.

I sat down at my desk and ignored a dozen emergencies to think about Miss Fletcher. There was a note from Miss Fletcher on my desk with the message that she had found a room on Riverside Drive.

I knew the building from the face of Mrs. Owens who smoked all brands. She had fifty families in the building. And she carried them like a woman going into her tenth month. The building had been taken over by operators. The great six, and eight-room apartments were demolished. The kitchens were turned into community kitchens with a padlock on the refrigerator. A coat of green paint buried the old plasterwork. The rooms were filled with families on assistance paying \$16 to \$25 a week for a room. The view out of the windows was the Hudson River. But no one ever saw the river. I never heard a single client mention the river. The Hudson just didn't exist. The operators of the building were two men who looked as though they had spent their childhood drowning their playmates. They wrote rent receipts the Supreme Court couldn't decipher. I'm sure that more care was taken of the garbage collected in New York than of the people in that building. I always stared at the building when I rode past it on the Fifth Avenue bus. The building was massive. On the outside it looked as stolid as the buildings on Fifth Avenue. But for me the building was always toppling. I could see it falling into the river. The building had no life, no living people in it. Not a single person with a plan for

tomorrow morning. And the children in the building raced through the corridors like wild horses going over a cliff.

The message said Miss Fletcher had rented room 22FW. The rent was \$17 a week. I knew the room. It was at the end of the foyer of a chopped-up eight-room apartment. The room faced a court. I couldn't imagine Miss Fletcher renting the room. Perhaps the limestone overawed her. The lobby of the building with its marble stairway. But the sun never entered 22FW. Roaches swarmed on the walls. It had no cooking, no running water. The toilet was shared by eight families. The walls were cracked. A chunk of one wall had been kicked in during a fight. I couldn't imagine any living person walking into the room and saying, this is where I'll live, I'll rent this room, and then sleep on the mattress, pull the blanket over themselves at night, a blanket you wouldn't even touch to wrap around a leaking water pipe in your basement. But I knew two families who had lived in the room. They stayed. Mrs. Rand stayed until she was picked up for narcotics. Mrs. Scarborough stayed with her two boys for eight months. The two boys were at St. Luke's Hospital more often than they saw the sand pits on Riverside Drive. Mrs. Scarborough moved out of the Riverside Drive building into an identical building on West End Avenue.

"Is your building still no referral?" I asked Mrs. Owens.

Mrs. Owens looked up from her desk, her face untangling itself from a thick stuffed case record that seemed to have almost taken on a life of its own.

"Look at this," Mrs. Owens told me. She pointed to the case record. "One woman there with five children in one room, and now she's pregnant and they've arrested the putative father for homosexually attacking one of her little

boys. Now the whole thing has to go to the Bureau of Child Welfare, to the SPCC, to the courts, and I don't know where else. I don't know what we mean when we say a building is no referral. Why don't we just board up the front doors? Lock the buildings up. We're not doing these people any good. And the rents we pay make me sick."

"Where would they go?" I asked Mrs. Owens.

"There's no place, I know, but you would think there ought to be. It's just making me sick."

Mrs. Owens put a fresh cigarette in her mouth. The smoke came from her mouth all day.

"I'm going back to Mississippi to take a rest from all of this," she told me. "I can rent a house in Mississippi for \$40 a month. I can make my money go about three times as far. I don't know what I'm doing here any more. These people have me caught. They really know they've got me. It's almost as though they've gotten together by agreement. The phone doesn't stop ringing for me all day. Every day one of them wants a coat or a pair of galoshes or money to go to the clinic or they move into thirty-dollar-a-week rooms—when I can't even afford to pay \$50 a month for my three rooms in Queens. It's too crazy for me. And it doesn't do anybody any good. We're just keeping them alive. I hate to say it but it's like a zoo. But no, it's not like a zoo, not from what I've seen of the Bronx Zoo. It's like what—I don't know, it's like nothing I knew in Mississippi in those dirt-road towns. I thought I was getting away from it when I came to New York. But New York has everything else, so why shouldn't it have what we see."

The phone rang. It was for Mrs. Owens.

"You see," she told me, "they've got a television eye trained on me."

I waited till Mrs. Owens hung up and then I asked, "What's the best room in your building?"

"There aren't any," she told me, "they're all rotten. The best rooms face the river on the top floors, but those apartments are taken over by the homosexuals and drug addicts. I tell you I'm afraid to go into the building. Particularly those top-floor apartments. You just see gangs and gangs of men, none of them working, you don't know who they are or what they are. They always seem to be washing their hair in the community kitchen. Half of them have the dumb look of pot on their faces. And they can be nasty. They all have knife wounds on their faces. I'd rather go into the worst buildings in Harlem than those sunny apartments facing the river. Look at this phone call I just got. Miss Washington just had her fourth baby. Four babies in one room. The father of the first baby is named John Williams, the second baby's father is William Johns, the third baby's father is John Jones, and the new father is John James. I grew up in a dirt cabin in Mississippi," she went on, "my mother cooked in a big iron pot hanging over an open fire. Where did these girls grow up that we see? Do you know what I think, they never grew up. They just play at sex. They don't even know they have babies. The babies just come like the full moon. But what's inside of their heads? Do they think like we think? Do you know why this job is making me sick, I can't even think of them as human any more, and I know they are but I would like just one in a hundred to prove it to me."

Mrs. Owens lit a fresh cigarette as though she were touching a match to an oilcan.

"Do you know, I stay awake at night with this foolishness. Sometimes I just can't fall asleep. And then when I do fall asleep I have dreams that no cold shower or breakfast coffee can wash away. I wonder how many of the girls we see dream about this nonsense. It's just making me sick. Just today. This Miss Washington called me about her fourth baby. Miss Zayas called me to say her son was arrested for selling narcotics. She didn't know anything about it. Mr. Mesquita called to tell me that somebody broke into his room and stole his pots, pans, radio, winter coat, and shoes. Mr. Taylor came into Service this morning to tell me a story that made me really sick. He said some men attacked him on the top floor of his building. He fought them off and hid in his room, shoving his bureau against the door. He called out of the window for the police but nobody paid any mind. He said the men began cutting through the door with their knives, saying they were going to cut his head off his shoulders if he didn't shove all of his money under the door. He said he began seeing their knives sawing through the wood. He kept screaming but still nobody paid any attention to him. He said when they pulled the door open he just rushed past them and fled down the stairs and rushed to hide in Central Park. He said he got behind some big rocks and squeezed himself in. He said he didn't have anything on but an undershirt. They had ripped his shirt off as he rushed through the door. He told me he hid in the park until he saw a policeman coming by on a horse. He told the policeman what happened and the policeman wanted to lock him up for being drunk. So he ran through the

park to a friend's house on the East Side. He stayed there two days and then came in to see me this morning so that he could get some money for food. I didn't know whether to believe a word that he told me.

"And all this time I've been trying to accept a case that really needs it, a woman whose social security just won't give her enough to live on. Do you know, Mr. Phillips, I can remember to this day, my mother reading the Bible to us kids. There were six of us. I think she made each one of us see that there was a direct line between us and God. And believe me, that's something we don't do with all of the money we spend, with all of our 661's for coats and layettes and the other nonsense. I just don't understand it. These women aren't mothers, they're just animals who happen to have babies."

Mrs. Owens went back to her desk and buried herself again in the case record she had been reading. Conversations like the one I just had with Mrs. Owens are always to the point, abrupt, they're prayers offered in public.

I called the Riverside Drive building. Miss Fletcher's floor had a hall telephone. Usually the coin phones in the buildings were ripped out by addicts who needed money in a hurry. A Spanish-speaking girl asked what do you want. I asked her to please knock on the door of room 22FW.

The Spanish-speaking girl told me there was no reply from 22FW.

I went across the floor to the desk of Ostrovsky, the housing consultant. Ostrovsky lived in the Bronx, the most ugly man-made city on earth. Ostrovsky's job was to find vacant apartments where none existed. He also had to have a lawyer's knowledge of the rent-control laws. The rent-

control laws were about the only measure that still kept the handful of white families in Manhattan from fleeing to the suburbs or back to the Midwestern towns where they were born.

"Do you have a single room with an inside toilet and a refrigerator unit?" I asked Ostrovsky.

"Look" he said characteristically. Ostrovsky always spoke as though he were imitating himself, still retaining the gold bar of a World War II adjutant. He knew the gold bar had been knocked off his shoulder by the fifties. But he wore the bar when he thought no one was looking, and that usually meant himself. But Ostrovsky did his day-to-day work with the severity of a graph.

"I know," I said, "but I need this for a girl who really needs it."

"Then let her go out and spend \$100 a month. She can afford it. You and I can't."

"I want her to get a minimum rental."

"There's no such thing any more. You know our maximum is our minimum. That's the way the landlords have interpreted our rent schedules. I don't know why we don't turn over the department to a Committee of Landlords. They know more about this department than anyone else, including our clients."

"I need a simple, clean, self-contained unit."

"It's like asking for a simple, clean, self-contained whore who's a virgin. It just doesn't exist. They exist, actually, but we don't have them. You know that."

"But one."

"Look, Phillips, the only things I can rehouse are cockroaches and homeless rats. Right now I've got a family of eight people. One mother and seven children. The

children range from three months to nine years. They've been living in a room eleven by fifteen feet. That doesn't include the putative father who sneaks in at night to impregnate the mother. They have a dispossession and a vacate order. I'm going to have to put them in a hotel suite at the rate of \$38.50 a week until we can rehouse them. That's \$83.41 semimonthly or \$166.82 per month. The suite is in a hotel on Broadway that should be the site of our next atom-bomb test. And I've been mulling over the thought that \$166.82 is just \$13.18 short of my yearly increment of \$180."

"If I asked you as a favor?"

"If you asked me as my mother, I couldn't do it. I can give you a room on West 102nd Street. It has a two-burner, oven-top stove and a refrigerator. The toilet is shared by ten charming families. The rent is \$18 a week. The landlord is Mr. Yoyo. And I predict that one day his tenants will tear him limb from limb and mail the pieces to the Temporary State Rent Commission."

The phone rang for Ostrovsky. He answered the call and then turned to me.

"That was our last chance to rehouse this family. They go into the hotel suite at \$38.50. In this entire charming city there aren't three rooms available to us to stick in eight people who may someday be our most outstanding schizophrenics."

Ostrovsky turned in his swivel chair.

"Look, Phillips, if this girl of yours wants a clean, decent room, then tell her to start walking to find one until she falls flat on her face and then let her get up again until her feet get bloody and then keep walking until she feels like Christ carrying his cross and then, maybe, she

might find a room under \$15 with cooking and an inside john."

I went back to my desk and Mrs. Owens told me, "Some girl just called for you. Her name is Miss Fletcher. She said she's waiting for you downstairs in Service and she has her baby with her."

7 I hurried to Service to see Miss Fletcher. Service is a big ugly room, ugly like all the loft buildings in New York. Long, attached wooden seats filled the room. And on the benches sit the people who have nowhere else to sit. No confessional box. No rabbi's study. No mother who will listen. No father. We have lost our father. That's what I thought as I hurried down into Service. We have lost our father. And no one can tell us where to find him.

I saw Miss Fletcher sitting beside the bare-top desk near the window. She held her baby across her knee, burping her. She looked up when she saw me. And I immediately saw that she had come to Service like everyone else. She had no other place to flee to.

Just as I crossed the middle of the room a Negro girl stood up and screamed. I saw her screaming at the interview desk of Mrs. Nivens. She turned toward the wooden benches to scream. The people on the benches stared dumbly at her wide-open mouth. Mrs. Nivens sat quietly

at her desk waiting for the girl to stop screaming. In an instant the girl did stop screaming.

"Why did she scream?" Miss Fletcher asked me.

"Probably because Mrs. Nivens asked her a question that she couldn't give an honest answer to."

"Do people often scream here like that?"

"Some do it loudly, most do it quietly. But everybody screams."

Miss Fletcher took her comfort where she could find it. She sat up her baby and wiped its face with a diaper. The baby smiled.

"It's just a gas pain," Miss Fletcher said. "She can't smile yet."

"She'll learn," I said. "But not in 22FW. How in the hell did you find that building?"

The Negro girl screamed again. Miss Fletcher dropped the bottle she was holding. The Negro girl broke just as the bottle broke. She stood up screaming, "I'm human! I'm human! I'm human! You dirty son of a bitch, can't you see that I'm human!"

The cry of being human was the most commonplace cry in Service. I heard it daily. It's the spatial cry of the beggar. Look the next time you see a beggar. The successful beggar always suggests he too is human. I don't know why we should have beggars. But beggars beg you to look on their face. And they are vicious when you turn from their face. Almost like the anger of a god. I knew one boy who begged on the subways. He had twisted legs and one arm chopped off. He dragged himself up in front of each passenger and stared into their face.

"What does she want?" Miss Fletcher asked.

"She wants to be human too." I bent to pick up the

broken pieces of the bottle. The milk was white and wet on the floor. From the look on Miss Fletcher's face you would think the milk had broken out of her breast. The girl's scream had shaken her. She looked across the gray plastered paint at the girl still standing in front of Mrs. Nivens. Mrs. Nivens motioned for the girl to sit down.

"No! you god-damn black son of a bitch!" the girl screamed again at Mrs. Nivens.

Mrs. Nivens called the next number, 34. She pretended to ignore the girl. Number 34 hurried past the girl and sat down. The girl picked up her pocketbook and rushed away from Mrs. Nivens desk. She sat down alone at an empty desk. She stiffened her body. Now she was under the sway of her memory. The sit-down. The sit-down of the infant who refuses to budge. Whose untutored memory knows that to be human means to be recognized.

"You didn't tell me why you moved into the Riverside Drive building," I said to Miss Fletcher. She turned sharply from the gray plastered painted walls. The ceiling with its exposed pipes. The benches crowded because the day was mild and warm and you could save carfare by walking. The Negro girl whose face now was a mask no collector would dare put on a living-room wall.

"I moved out of there right after I started to diaper Ellen on the bed and I saw bugs beginning to bite her on the leg. Her leg got all red. I finished diapering her and got out of the room. I got some salve at Whelan's and took a bus here."

"Why didn't you go back to Figueroa's room?"

Miss Fletcher looked toward the girl. She looked as if she would like to borrow a scream from her.

"Figueroa said I couldn't come back. He borrowed

\$20 in the East Bronx and gave it to me. He said that would pay for one week's rent until I got a check from you."

"But you gave \$17 to the landlord at the Riverside Drive building."

"He gave me back \$14.50. He said he would have to charge me for one day because I used the sheets."

"Why did you take the room in the first place?"

"I just rented it without looking at it. But then I looked. Who lived there before me? Who's going to live there after me?"

"He'll rent it. Those rooms are like hospital beds. They just have time to change the sheets."

"I need a room now," Miss Fletcher said. "That broken bottle was her afternoon feeding. We both need a room." Her voice was beginning to be reached by the Service room, the floor like the earth at a cemetery, everything grows but the dead, everything lives but the living. Only the preacher tries to sit on both worlds. And only the dead are permitted to know God.

"All right, wait here for a minute," I told Miss Fletcher.

I went to pick up a telephone, the most sacrosanct object in our world.

I called my house on West End Avenue where the landlord had ripped out the old plumbing, put in pink and blue tile, and had taught his guests to respect a clean toilet bowl, and I called my house on West 87th Street, exhausting my collection of clean landlords.

"Mr. Phillips?" Mrs. Baruch got up from the long bench that led to the reception desk.

"Do you have a minute?" she asked me. "Just one minute? I only came in person because it's so difficult for

me to make myself understood on the telephone." Mrs. Baruch spoke English with a remote Viennese accent. She wore white gloves, a white hat, a light blue silk dress. But her face looked as though a Nazi regiment had marched over it.

"I have a minute," I said. I saw Miss Fletcher give me a worried look when I sat down with Mrs. Baruch.

"I must move again, Mr. Phillips, please don't dislike me for it. But you can't imagine my new landlady. She won't permit me to keep the windows open. She won't permit me my bath at night. She won't permit me my coffee. I must obey her like a child. And you know I must have my bath and I must have my open window. Otherwise my asthma is terrible. I can't breathe. And I must even beg her for a rent receipt. She told me her son is returning from school and she must have her room."

"So you can move again, Mrs. Baruch."

"But it causes you so much bother. I don't like to come here. You can't find me an apartment that would be private?"

"We just don't have them."

"But only one."

"Don't you ever see them advertised in the *Aufbau*?"

"No, only rooms in private apartments. And with people who only consider you as their means to be able to pay their rent. And so they hate you more than themselves."

"Then just move again."

"I don't want to move again. It is like living on a train for me. There's only noise and everything shaking. And always the conductor asking you for your ticket."

Mrs. Baruch had come to cry. She wept quietly but openly. She wanted a witness for her crying.

"I don't have an apartment for you, Mrs. Baruch," I told her, "and you can find better rooms through the *Aufbau* than we could ever get for you. Just make sure that you send me your moving bill and I'll send you a check to pay for the moving." Mrs. Baruch had moved six times in the past eight months. Always into private apartments on West End Avenue. Huge, empty apartments, the children all grown up to Queens, Great Neck, the suburbs. Only the parents remained, for the *Daily News* at 9 P.M.

"This you can do for me," Mrs. Baruch said, "that I know. But an apartment, no?"

"We just don't have them."

"In this big city. In this enormous city. In this city where there are nothing but apartments. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I say to myself, this is not a city, I don't know what it is and I am afraid to say. But I must have an open window for my asthma and I must have my bath. And you can't imagine how difficult it is to find a landlady who will graciously grant two such simple requests. But I am taking up too much of your time."

Mrs. Baruch put on her white gloves.

"When you move telephone me," I said to her.

"Always the telephone. My husband has been dead ten years now. And so have I. Only I must wait until I am officially notified."

Mrs. Baruch shook hands with me to say goodbye. She went to the freight elevator that brings the clients up to the Service floor.

I sat down at the telephone and called one more landlord, a clean one, who put his life's savings from a shoe store into a brownstone house on West 87th Street. His

house had polished walnut banisters and marble toilets. His hallways were carpeted and he bought the furniture for the house at the auction sale of the old Lafayette Hotel.

The shoe man had no vacancy. He never did. But I always called his number to know that the gods had been exhausted.

Miss Fletcher got up from her chair. I motioned to her not to leave her pocketbook. She came over to me.

"The baby soiled. Is there any place where I can change her?"

"In here." I took her into the room that had a cot and a table. The room used for psychiatric examinations. Usually for emergency psychiatric examinations. But often for psychiatric examinations that were simply casual questions to determine if a person was no longer properly fortified to submit to further indignities. The State hospitals had what they called experimental programs. The experiment meant releasing a person from a mental institution into the open-air institution of Upper Broadway. The people came penniless from the hospitals. We gave them clothing, pots and pans, dishes, and sufficient money to keep their presence unknown.

Miss Fletcher changed the baby's diaper. The diaper was just wet, so she put it in a plastic bag.

"Can I nurse her in here?" she asked.

The baby seemed to be glad that the bottle had broken. It seized the extended nipple like Mrs. Baruch would have seized the dead hand of her husband to waken him from the dead.

Miss Fletcher looked away from the baby to ask me, "When will she begin knowing things?"

"When it's too late to forget them," I told her.

"That woman you just talked to, is she on welfare?"

"She just walked from 110th Street to save fifteen cents' carfare. The first time I talked to her was in her room on West 98th Street. She was seventy then. She had to cook in a community kitchen and almost starved because her food was stolen everyday. She has a daughter in New York who is forty-eight years old. The daughter just had a cyst removed. The daughter contributes two dollars a week toward the support of her mother. They live five blocks from one another. I asked the mother why she doesn't live with her daughter. She said ask my daughter. I asked the daughter. The daughter told me. The daughter said she had a one-and-a-half-room apartment and her mother's asthma kept her awake at night and she couldn't get to work on time in the morning."

"I know what you mean, Mr. Phillips. I know my mother's only fifteen minutes away. I know there's a bed I can use tonight. But I've got to make it on my own. I don't want to walk in on my mother and see her eyes start to fill up with everything that's happened to her for the past twenty years. That's more awful than any room you could find for me."

The baby protested but Miss Fletcher took the baby away from her breast and held her up for me to see. The baby worked hard for its milk. It's forehead was sweaty.

"Look at her, Mr. Phillips, I can't take my eyes off her. I look at her the way I sometimes catch myself looking at the sky or a tree, or my own mother when she's being nice to me." She put the baby back on her breast. "When I look at her I seem to remember everything I should know but don't know and that I want to know." She turned

toward the door. "If a lady of seventy can walk all these blocks to save fifteen cents, then I can take any room you can find for me. I just had to run out of that Riverside Drive building. It just made you want to run. But I lived at the Chester."

"I called five landlords and none of them had a vacancy."

"I just couldn't look with Ellen, that's why I came to you. I thought you had a lot of rooms, even if they weren't too good."

"We have some. And I'll go upstairs and get you a vacancy before the office closes. I just called the clean houses. But look— In any room that you go to, you don't have a pot or a pan and clothes with you, not even a towel—"

"That can wait for a day. Ellen only needs me to feed her. And I can eat out. Or buy enough so that I don't have to go out."

"All right. Wait here. I'll see what I can do upstairs."

Ostrovsky telephoned two buildings for me on West 94th Street.

"They don't like babies any more," Ostrovsky told me. "Babies bring out the violations in building inspectors."

Ostrovsky dialed a building on West 99th Street. "This son of a bitch will take babies. But he doesn't guarantee that they'll survive. I used to have this building when I went to the field. Whenever I pulled open the door to his lobby I said goodbye to my conscience. He was the most moral son of a bitch I ever met. I couldn't believe my ears when he spoke. He taught me my field work in mental gymnastics. His building, shall we say, was as foul as a GI

latrine after a breakfast of creamed beef on a shingle. He even had tenants buried in the basement, four rooms that brought him in an additional \$199.28 per month. The rooms were actually like dungeons. I always expected to see my clients chained to their beds—c'mon, answer you son of a bitch!" Ostrovsky hung up. "He's probably making a bank deposit. Look, doesn't this girl have a boy friend she can stay with for tonight?"

"He threw her out."

"That's probably a break for her."

"She wants to marry him."

"Good, I'll contribute toward a wedding present."

Ostrovsky dialed a house on Central Park West.

"I think we're in luck," Ostrovsky told me, "there's a single room with a cooking unit and the john is only shared by two hundred people. The rent is \$17.85 a week which sounds like a legal figure. Do you want it?"

I nodded yes. Ostrovsky told the landlord to hold the room.

"Well," said Ostrovsky, "I did it again. I can sleep in peace for another night. If my mathematical genius of a wife doesn't start to torment me again about my weekly take-home pay. She got hold of a public assistance budget schedule and figured out that with my latest increment I'm now only three dollars short of what I would receive on public assistance. One more increment and I'll only be fifty cents short of the public assistance level. In the meantime, upward and onward."

Ostrovsky saw that I was anxious to go.

"The room is 5DF. The landlord's name is Mr. Winna. The rent is \$17.85 per week. There's a dollar deposit for a

key. He furnishes the linen and what crawls with it. If the girl doesn't have the cash for the rent, he'll wait for a supplementary check. Good luck, and may she have a short and happy life."

Miss Fletcher was sitting again beside the bare-top desk. The sun didn't try to avoid the Service room. The sun flooded through the two huge windows. The cigarette butts, the orange peels, the wax paper, the Dixie cups, the copies of the *News* and *Mirror* as thumbed as old one-dollar bills, the wads of spit that hadn't yet soaked into the wood, the desks with the oak veneer peeled by nervous clients, the walls with the monstrous gray paint—the sun sought it all, as though to bring back a report to God. The Negro girl who had screamed was sitting right in the path of the sun. She let the sun fall on her face. She kept her eyes closed. Her hands were stiff on the desk but her body appeared to be rocking.

And the humpty dumpty broke in her.

"I want my father!"

The girl swayed. I could see her hands clawing at the empty air as though she were falling twenty stories.

"I want my father! Jesus, where's my father! What did you do with him? Why did you sons of bitches write to him? Why did you drive my father away? Bring back my father to me! I need my father! Do you hear? I need my father! I need him now! I need my father! Where is he? Where are you hiding him? Where did you send him to? Where did you put him? Find him for me! Don't take him from me! Don't take him from me! Don't take him from me!"

I caught the girl before she hit the floor. Her hands

were wet. Her body cold. She wet and her feet dragged in the puddle. The guard came over to help me. We carried her into the room that had the cot. We put her on the cot and I put a blanket over her. I could feel her body trembling. She caught hold of my hand.

"Listen, mister," she told me, her words getting past her teeth that she clenched, as though she should swallow herself and that would be it. "Don't let them take me to Bellevue, please don't let them take me to Bellevue, please ask them just to send me home, please just to get back to my room. I'm not for Bellevue. I can't make it in Bellevue. I just want to get back to my room."

The guard gave her a paper cup of water.

I saw when she lay flat on her back that she was pregnant.

"How far along are you?" I asked.

"Three months. You're not a doctor. I saw you talking to that girl with the baby. How did you know?"

"Just a guess."

"The investigator wrote to the father of the baby and he took off. He just left his room on 118th Street and I couldn't find him anywhere. I've been looking for him for three days now. He said he was going to marry me, which is a word you never hear on my block. But they scared him with the letter. He just went. Like ten thousand before him. They don't know colored men. They ain't men. Not when they go below 110th Street. You've got to build them up into men, like nickels and dimes in a penny bank. They're always thinking of a big hit. They can't see the nickels and dimes. I had mine built. He was ready. You see they don't know anything about this in Bellevue. But you know or you wouldn't be talking so

long to that girl and her baby. Just tell them not to send for an ambulance and I'll go."

"You're all right otherwise?"

"I'm sorry I wet. But when you're pregnant your bladder is weak. I'm just ten blocks from my room. I came here to see my investigator. I thought he might know something about the father running away. Maybe he got a phone call. They told me the investigator wasn't in and that broke me up. I didn't want to yell at anybody but I had to yell. I couldn't hold it in or the baby would have strangled. Jesus, please, I don't want to start having to explain all this again to a bunch of strangers at Bellevue."

"If you're all right," I told the girl, "you can go. Nobody will hold you here. But are you sure you're all right? Don't worry about Bellevue, I mean physically all right."

"I'm due for a checkup at Metropolitan tomorrow. I have to be there at ten o'clock. Here's my appointment slip."

"All right," I said, "rest here until you feel you can go. I'll tell the Intake Supervisor you're all right."

"I can go now." She sat up and put her feet over the side of the cot onto the floor. The guard helped her to her feet.

"You go back to that girl," she told me, "she's already got her baby out in the world. Oh Jesus," she said, "why did you leave us so quick and with so little?"

I told Mr. Burns, the Intake Supervisor, that the girl just had a fainting spell. He would have believed anything just to see her go home without any further difficulty.

I gave Miss Fletcher the address of the building on Central Park West, I told her not to pay any rent and to use the money she had for food and to telephone me at

10 A.M. She looked as though she had ten million questions. But I didn't have a single answer. I walked her to the freight elevator. The baby had slept through the girl's screaming. But awoke with the rumbling of the freight car.

8 I came early. For me the ten or fifteen minutes before nine o'clock are moments of extraordinary privacy. The phones are as silent as hyenas at the same hour. The room is usually empty except for Bronson. Bronson holds two degrees but can't teach in a New York public school because he was born in the Deep South and still retains a Southern Negro accent. Bronson works as a maintenance man in a Fifth Avenue building from 7 P.M. to 2 A.M. to pay for his Flatbush house. He told me he likes to come early for the same reason as I do. The moment of privacy. The empty room that is as quiet as a cathedral, except it doesn't have the built-in architectural stillness.

"When do you see your three kids?" I asked Bronson.

"I only see the face of that god-damn mortgage. I don't have children," Bronson said, "I only have responsibilities. Did you ever read the Earl of Chesterfield's letters to his son? That's the god-damndest book. Here's a man who gave perfect advice to his son and the son crossed him up

on every bit of advice. Just as though they were fighting out a duel. I look at my kids—when I see them on Saturday morning—and ask myself, what's better for them, a house with a \$14,000 mortgage or a father they can see once in a while? But they're getting older. Kids drift away from you when they get older. I can feel it. When I'm not so numb that I can't feel anything."

Bronson sipped on his container of coffee.

"But they know they have a father," I said to Bronson.

"They god-damn well know it. We get along fine when we get along. But there's a drift you can feel, just like the tide when you get caught swimming off shore. Do you know, Phillips, the older you get—and I'm getting so old now I can begin to feel old—the older you get the more you begin to feel life in chunks. This piece of pie you can have, this piece of pie you can't have, this piece of pie will kill you if you eat it, this piece of pie is behind some god-damn window that you can't get to—period. And working in this place doesn't help. When I tell my wife what I see during the day here her hands begin to shake and she gives me an extra piece of meat."

Bronson laughed, that laugh which is the embarrassment of us all.

"I came home about 2:45 this morning. We had a snack before we got to bed. My wife gets up when I come in, which I think is nice of her. Then I don't feel like a hired bastard crawling off to sleep on the cornhusks. I told her about a girl I had seen yesterday. Eighteen years old, a nice girl, a girl born right here in New York City. Her natural father told her to go to hell. Her stepfather supported her until just three days ago and then he told her to go to hell, she was eighteen, and goodbye. Her mother

helped shove her out the door. The girl got grabbed in a hallway when she was fourteen and she had a baby on her fifteenth birthday and that ended high school for her. Then some boy from the Bronx got into her when she was sixteen and that was baby number two. I went out to see her. She and the two kids were sleeping on the floor of a girl friend who had a furnished hotel room on West 110th Street. Three adults told this girl to go to hell, turned their backs, and beat it. Now this girl has two boys starting to grow up. How's she going to make it? I talked about it with my wife until 2:30 in the morning. And this morning I realized I can't do a god-damn thing for her except put her on the budget, and from my experience in the matter, I don't expect God to do a damn thing."

Bronson picked up the thick black manual on his desk.

"Look at this son-of-a-bitching thing. I think it was written in hell in some air-conditioned, stainless steel, windowless room. This is the damndest book. I've been studying this book for the past couple of weeks instead of just using it. This book, Phillips, contains the absolute minimum fixed prices necessary to maintain subsistence living in present-day New York City—which is one of the richest biggest cities in the entire history of the world, period. This book is the papa for 350,000 people right here in New York City getting assistance. And I'll bet my pay that there are tens of thousands of people right here in New York who don't even live up to the minimum standards that we lay down but who would rather eat old newspapers than apply for welfare. Do you see what I'm driving at Phillips? We're not giving what's necessary, we're just giving what's minimum. Because those tens of thousands who live below the minimum have got what I call what's nec-

essary for living. Do you know why I've been studying this manual, because my actual take-home pay is below the minimum of what I would get if I went downstairs and signed an application. So it's not money. And now I become lost, Phillips. Because I know in my old bones that the world isn't no god-damn perfect round ball. That round ball is flattened out at both ends. And so are we. But why should we be flattened out? That's where I get lost. That's where my thinking gets stopped. And as far as I can make out, nobody else's thinking begins. Nobody who counts, that is."

The telephones began ringing like the pealing of bells. The cathedral doors swung open. The cathedral lost its sanctity.

I sat down at my desk and began to compute the budget that would give Miss Fletcher and her baby \$1.25 a day for food.

I turned to the open manual on my desk. Page two listed the allowances for a family of two persons. Miss Fletcher was entitled to receive \$15.90 semimonthly for food, personal care, and clothing, which broke down into \$12.25 for food, \$.55 for personal care, and \$3.10 for clothing, or \$.81 a day for food. The baby got \$8.25, or \$6.60 for food, \$.30 for personal care, \$1.10 for clothing, and \$.25 for cod-liver oil, or \$.44 a day for food. Miss Fletcher also got \$.60 for household operations, \$1.70 for laundry, \$3.25 for laundering diapers, and \$38.67 for rent. The total budget was \$68.37 semimonthly, or \$136.74 a month. The rent was more than one half of the budget.

But Miss Fletcher didn't have a pot or an extra diaper. She didn't have a knife and fork. I dipped into the manual and prepared the following 661 for Miss Fletcher: one

complete layette, \$29.10; formula-making equipment, in case her breasts ran dry which I expected them to do after she spent three nights alone with the baby in her room on Central Park West. I gave her money for 10 pyrex bottles, nipples, nipple caps, a sterilizer and rack, tongs, a measuring saucepan, measuring spoons, a funnel strainer, and a nipple brush. I gave her \$24 for a reconditioned crib with a new mattress, \$21 for a baby carriage, and \$18.05 to buy water-repellent sheeting, crib sheets, blankets, washcloths, and a diaper pail with cover. The landlord at the Central Park West building would provide a chest and a double bed. Nothing else.

I made up a household list for Miss Fletcher: 1 double boiler with lid, 1 saucepan with lid, 1 pot with lid, 1 frying pan, 1 coffeepot, 1 kitchen spoon, fork, knife, 1 can opener, 1 measuring cup, 1 butter dish, 1 garbage can, 1 dishpan, 2 place settings at \$1.15 each, 2 water glasses at \$.10 each, 2 settings of stainless steel cutlery at \$.95 each, 1 utility pail, broom, scrub brush, dustpan, mop head and mopstick, 1 electric iron and cord, 1 ironing board, 1 alarm clock, 1 rack for drying clothes. I added 1 dozen safety pins, 1½ pound of absorbent cotton, 1 large bar of white unscented soap, and 5 ounces of baby oil. The last four items totaled \$2.10, including 3 per cent New York City sales tax. I could have even given Miss Fletcher electric bulbs at \$.19 each, but they were supplied by the landlord.

I guessed that Miss Fletcher had an adequate supply of clothing for herself. By adequate the manual meant 1 hat, 1 raincoat (but only for employed women), 1 sweater, 1 skirt, 1 blouse, 3 cotton housedresses, 1 cotton street dress, 1 rayon street dress, 1 part-wool dress, 3 panties, 3 union

suits, 1 rayon slip, 2 cotton slips, 1 medium-weight girdle, 1 corset good support, 2 brassieres bandeau type, 2 brassieres good support, 2 cotton nightgowns, 2 flannel nightgowns, 1 winter bathrobe, 2 pairs of nylon stockings, 2 pairs of cotton stockings, 1 pair of shoes, 1 pair of bedroom slippers, 1 pair of galoshes, and 1 pair of rubbers. If the landlord at the Central Park West building didn't provide linen, I could give Miss Fletcher blankets, pillows, sheets, a bedspread, pillowcases, bath towels, hand towels, washcloths, kitchen towels, and window screens. At the end of three years, the baby's allowance would rise from \$10.20 to \$11.15 semimonthly, an increase of \$.95. Miss Fletcher's allowance of \$15.90 would not change until she became sixty-five years old, and then she would receive \$17.05.

I put Miss Fletcher's case folder into the out-basket for statistical action, control, the IBM machines, the perforated check, the surplus food certificate, the file cabinet that buries us long before the dirt fills our noses and falls harmlessly over our eyes.

I didn't wait for Miss Fletcher to telephone. I left the office and caught the Eighth Avenue bus. I intended to stop in to see Mrs. Gilbert, who was expecting her fourth baby, and then see Miss Fletcher. Mrs. Gilbert lived a few blocks from the building Ostrovsky had found for Miss Fletcher. Mrs. Gilbert paid \$130 a month rent for two and a half rooms. The half room consisted of a sink, a stove, a refrigerator. The half room opened into the living room which was also a sleeping room, and there was a bedroom. The apartments had been floor-through railroad flats but the landlord, functionally cut them in half and tripled their occupancy and quadrupled the rental. A railroad flat

rents for about \$50 a month. The lessee was getting \$260 a month for the same apartment. And they were the most desirable apartments in New York. Because you could dump in as many kids as the families had. Mrs. Jackson on the top floor had eight children and her fourteen-year-old daughter was pregnant and due to deliver in September. Mrs. Gilbert had three children and the fourth was due by the end of the week. Mrs. Gilbert was a sweet woman but she lived like a pig. She had her rooms piled with discarded clothing, boxes, paper bags, newspapers, magazines. There wasn't enough free space for the children to sit down to eat. I told her a hundred times to throw out every piece of junk in her two rooms, that I would give the kids all new clothing, I would give her money for fresh beds. But she wouldn't throw out a piss-stinking rag. She had been to the SPCC, the BCW, the attendance officers had been to her house, the building inspector had been called in, but she didn't throw out a rag. I asked her why? And she looked at me with her soft brown eyes as though I should know better than to try to disturb her plan.

I got off the bus and looked at the great outcropping of rocks that faces Central Park West and then I turned up West 99th Street to Mrs. Gilbert's house. I stood and looked at the house. The sun was just right in the sky for its bulk to light up the house like those anatomical charts that reach into our ribs. Miss Allen, Miss Powers, and Mrs. Farrar lived on the first floor. Miss Allen had five babies, Miss Powers had four babies, and Mrs. Farrar had seven children. Miss Gross, Miss Peters, Mrs. Rivera, and Mrs. Burke lived on the second floor. They had seventeen children among them. On the third floor Mrs. Gilbert, Mrs. Small, Miss Reyes, and Mrs. Tyler had eighteen children

among them. On the fourth floor there were twenty children, on the top floor Mrs. Jackson, Mrs. Cortez, Mrs. Samson, and Miss Long had nineteen children. There wasn't a man living in the house. The house had been visited by the building inspectors and they found 245 violations. The most serious violations were the packs of rats that had dug themselves into the walls. The wiring was as bad as a mined field. The vermin lived unmolested. Each tenant paid \$30 a week or \$65 semimonthly or \$130 a month, or altogether they paid \$2,470 a month rent.

I entered the hallway the lessee had painted green to remove one violation. But it was like trying to apply paint to a wall of grease.

I knocked on Mrs. Gilbert's door. The door was opened by her oldest girl, Annie, who was nine. Rosalie and Deborah were sitting on the bed. The three girls looked frightened. They sat stiff and proper on the bed as though their mother had placed them in the position and told them not to move until she returned. There was a container of milk on the table and three full glasses of milk that hadn't been touched.

"Where's your mother?" I asked Annie.

"She's gone."

"Where?"

"To call."

"Who?"

"She said first to call you. Then she was going to the hospital."

"Was she due?"

"She said the baby was coming. She couldn't wait."

"Was she sick?"

"She was sick."

"What did your mother tell you to do?"

"She said just to sit here until somebody came. She said she was going to call Mr. Phillips and he would send somebody out for us."

"Couldn't she call earlier?" But the question was to myself. I told Mrs. Gilbert that we had to work out a placement for her three girls. That it took time. That there just wasn't an empty bed in New York to stick in an extra baby. That it took hours to find a placement. Mrs. Gilbert didn't have a relative in New York. She didn't have a friend. She had no idea where the fathers of her three children lived. She didn't know the father of her coming baby. She told me he had just spoken nice to her when she was sitting on a bench on Central Park West and she went to his room for a couple of hours while Annie looked after the two younger girls. She never saw him again and she told me she just didn't think she could have any more babies.

I asked Annie, Rosalie, and Deborah if they wanted to eat. There was a box of marshmallow cookies on the table, a package of liverwurst. They shook their heads. I told Annie I was going to the corner to make a telephone call and for her to keep the door closed and look after her sisters.

I went out into the hallway, down the stairs into the street, and looked east toward Central Park and the visible sky. The sky is a phenomenon in New York not to be missed. It can usually be seen during the daylight hours.

I called the office and got Jackson on the phone. He told me Mrs. Gilbert had called from a pay phone. "Why

didn't you deliver that poor woman's baby and save us all this trouble? Where in the hell are we going to place three kids?"

Jackson told me to hang up and he would call me back in ten minutes. I bought some potato chips for the kids, Nestlé bars, Pepsi-Cola, and rolls for the liverwurst.

The phone rang and Jackson told me to stay with the kids and call him back after lunch. He said there wasn't an empty bed in the city. BCW was trying to get a placement in Jamaica. He asked me if Rosalie had had her series of shots. "She's breathing, that's all I know," I told Jackson.

Annie made liverwurst sandwiches with the rolls. Rosalie only ate the potato chips. Deborah wouldn't touch the food, so I gave her a package of Chiclets. There was only one free chair in the room. The three girls sat on the edge of the bed. The bed was piled with sacks of washed clothes. Suitcases were piled to the ceiling against the wall—suitcases and cartons of clothes. A baby carriage and a crib made it impossible to spread out more chairs in the living room. There was an overstuffed chair buried under old newspapers. The sink had garbage in it. The plates weren't washed. I found an empty bag and started dumping the garbage into it. Annie got off the bed and helped me. She held the bag and I scraped the plates clean. The plates were thick with grease, the rice wouldn't wash off. The sink actually had hot water. I soaked the dishes and carried the garbage out to the cans in front of the stoop. When I got back to the room, I dumped out all the food left in the pots on the stove. There was a pot of rice and a pot of chicken wings. I opened the refrigerator and took out a bowl of rice pudding and dumped it into the bag. I poured the milk into the sink. I noticed roaches crawling

into a box of puffed wheat and threw the puffed wheat into the bag.

I washed the dishes and Annie dried them. I asked Rosalie and Deborah to pick up the papers on the floor. When we finished with the dishes, I gave the girls the Nestlé bars.

I asked Annie where their mother kept their best clothes. Annie pointed to the bedroom.

The clothes hung from a long nail driven into the wall. I couldn't believe Annie, Rosalie, and Deborah lay down in the bedroom at night to sleep. The double bed was sagging in the middle, its sheets soaked with urine. The window was boarded up. The walls were broken and I could hear the slithering of rats. Three dresses hung on the nail and two pink Easter hats. There was a short blue coat for Rosalie. Rosalie was three, Deborah was five, and Annie was nine.

I told Annie, Rosalie, and Deborah to wash and to take off their clothes and to put on clean underwear and their pressed dresses.

I carried out the garbage, the bundle of papers Annie had swept up. I went to the corner and telephoned the office.

Jackson gave me two addresses in Jamaica. The addresses meant a long train ride into the borough of Queens. But Annie, Rosalie, and Deborah were on their way to private homes, not an institution. The institution would come later. More were being built. You never heard of an institution being closed up for lack of children.

Annie, Deborah, and Rosalie were dressed when I returned. I told the girls their mother had to go to Metropolitan Hospital and they were going to stay with a family

in Jamaica until their mother came home from the hospital. They accepted the news with the calm that passes for good manners in children coiled up like a jack-in-the-box.

Deborah picked up a plastic doll with a chocolate brown face. The dolls for Negro children don't look like dolls. The dolls are flesh.

I told Annie to hold Deborah's hand and for Deborah to hold Rosalie's hand and I held Rosalie's.

We entered the subway at West 96th Street. The platform was deserted. The express trains roared by. I told Annie, Deborah, and Rosalie to stand against the wall and not to let go of one another's hand. Deborah held onto her doll. In a moment the local train pulled into the station. I waited until the train had completely stopped and then we entered the car.

Annie and Deborah sat down. I held Rosalie on my lap.

I felt an eye on me. A giant eye. I looked up to see the eye. The eye was a lean man in a blue cotton suit and he held a brief case. The eye looked at me as though it had fallen out of its socket and was thrashing about on the floor of the subway trying to find its owner. I felt tempted to pick up the eye and put it back in its socket.

I realized the man saw us as a family group. Rosalie was curled up in my arms. I held her the way a father quickly learns. Annie and Deborah were linked to me by Deborah's hand.

The eye followed us on the platform at 59th Street. The A train, the D train, the 242nd Street Broadway train, the express and local trains, all converge at 59th Street. Above on the street is the statue of Christopher Columbus. The eyes on the platform stared at Annie, Deborah, Rosalie,

and myself with more awe than Christopher Columbus stared from the top of his perch at the sky of New York.

I realized that my face was still my own and didn't register a priestly occupation. I wore an open-necked red-and-black checkered cotton shirt. My pants were chino cotton. I didn't shave in the morning and had the beginning of a rough beard. My shoes were brown loafers. The kids could be mine. That's what the faces were trying to figure out. Did Annie, Deborah, and Rosalie belong to me?

The E train was late on Seventh Avenue. The platform began to fill up with the Fifth Avenue rush hour. The rush began to frighten the girls. I told Annie to make certain she had Deborah's hand. I held Rosalie. I felt in my pocket for some pennies and bought the girls six penny boxes of Chiclets. I could feel Rosalie getting heavy. The sway of the train, the banging of the doors, the bulbs trying to light the platform was putting her to sleep. The eyes may have put her to sleep. They were now heavy on us. I felt as though one of the eyes was going to approach me and ask me to declare myself.

There was a rush for seats when the E train pulled into the station. I shoved Annie, Deborah, and myself with Rosalie through the slamming doors.

I boosted Rosalie up on my shoulder. Her eyes were heavy and the swaying of the train put her to sleep like an infant on his bottle. Deborah held onto my trouser leg. Annie stood alongside me, holding onto the metal pole. I looked at the seated passengers to see which one would rise for us. Deborah was almost asleep. She swayed with the train and seemed to know that she had to keep her eyes open. Annie was trying to be a big girl but the push of the bodies flattened her against the pole.

I looked at the two rush-hour men seated in a double seat. One looked over the top of his *New York Post* at us as though he were watching two dogs on the street mating. The younger man didn't dare look at us. In front of us was a Negro woman who I thought would rise like a bugler. But she looked straight into my face and past my face and I don't know where her look ended. Nobody moved to give us a seat. Deborah stood with her eyes shut, swaying like a child trying to get back to sleep. Rosalie had already shut her eyes. Annie kept her eyes fearfully open.

In Jamaica we entered a fairyland. The sun burst on us as though in apology. The sky was a deep blue. Great white clouds filled the blue. The air had almost the entire sky to itself. The buildings didn't rear up like smoking dragons guarding the entrance to the kingdom of the sky. Annie, Deborah, and Rosalie awoke from the subway ride as though tapped on the forehead by a fairy princess. We got into a taxi and rode out to the two addresses Bronson had given me.

Annie was to stay at the first address. The taxi turned away from the subway and entered streets of one-family homes with gardens and back yards. We stopped in front of a house with green hedges, a porch with a swing.

I rang the bell and a housewife came to the door with a big smile. She took up Annie and led her into the house that had a sun-filled living room with a Persian rug, fine upholstered chairs, a shining black grand piano, a fireplace which looked as though it worked.

I got back into the cab with Rosalie and Deborah, and we rode on for five more blocks through the streets of green lawns and stopped in front of a ranch home with a patio.

I rang the bell that turned out to be chimes. The door opened and I saw chairs of oiled teak, draperies of silk gauze, a long Danish couch covered with rainbow fabric, a lamp I had seen in Jensen's window. The housewife who came to the door picked up Rosalie and Deborah and told them there was milk and cake waiting for them on the kitchen table.

Metropolitan Hospital kept a pregnancy case three days, and I doubted if in three days Rosalie and Deborah would learn to say Rumpelstiltskin.

9 I stepped into the squat elevator in Miss Fletcher's building and I saw the "alarm" and "stop" buttons had been torn out. I decided to walk the four flights.

Ostrovsky had picked blind for Miss Fletcher. Piles of garbage lay at each turning of the stairway. One bag had spilled over. The yellowed spaghetti poured out on the landing. On the third landing I saw a man going through the garbage bags. He picked out some chicken bones and three slices of bread. I waited to see if he was going to chew on the chicken bones and eat the bread. He saw me staring at him. He noticed my black notebook. He smiled, and if the sun hadn't been shining I would have fled. He stuck the bread in his pocket and put the chicken bones back in the bag. He wore a heavy black suit, his pockets were bulging. He was past sixty, white, his face was as white as screeching chalk.

"You thought I was going to eat the garbage," he said.

I did think he was going to eat the garbage.

"This is for the animals across the street in Central Park. There's no balance of life in Central Park. The animals can't survive without stale white bread and popcorn. They never thought of that when they built the park back in 1858. I've been living in this building for twenty-five years. I've fed about forty generations in the park. And it's just recently that I've found so much garbage readily available. This building has changed more in twenty-five years than the park will change in twenty-five thousand years. I've been here through the entire change. I'm the only one left of the old tenants. And they'd like to get me out. Do you know what I pay for my room? \$3.50 a week. That's what I've been paying for the last eighteen years. That's all that I've got left here out of twenty-five years. My maximum legal rent. Are you my new investigator?" he asked.

"No," I said, and I went up to the next landing as though I was climbing out of a crypt. The buildings were never swept clean. An old tenant always remained. They were the only proper ruins in New York.

I went to the open hall window on the fifth floor to get some air. The window looked out on Central Park. The trees were dense and green. The rocks rose high, hiding the limestone of Fifth Avenue. The wind blew from the south. It carried a tantalizing smell of the Atlantic that lay only thirty minutes away by the IND subway. I saw a gang of boys enter the park like a python. They were strung out in a line, almost in a crouch, the sun catching the stars on their black leather, zippered jackets. Their hands were curled up into fists. The leader was heavy and squat and he walked like the probing head of a snake. I counted ten boys. The youngest looked about twelve years

old. They slid into the park. They had eight hundred and forty acres to prod. To the east lay Fifth Avenue. To the south lay 59th Street and the avenues that emptied into the ocean. To the north lay Harlem, a damned-up sea. I saw a mounted policeman riding on a brown horse. I saw a blue Pedigree baby carriage. And I saw the man in the heavy black suit take the bread out of his pocket and crumble it for the silent pigeons.

I turned from the window to find Miss Fletcher's room when I saw the landlord, Mr. Winna. "I forgot to tell you that Miss Fletcher moved from 5 DF to 5 DE. The rent is only \$.75 a week more and it's a bigger room."

Mr. Winna had a round wet face. His skin looked like wet clay. He dressed in clothes that were too big for him. His jacket hung almost to his knees. He sat in a cage on the lobby floor.

"She asked me for a room facing the park. I don't blame her. On Fifth Avenue they pay a fortune for this same view of the park my tenants get for \$18 a week."

"Not exactly the same view." I sometimes get tired of permitting disagreeable people to be agreeable.

Mr. Winna turned abruptly from Central Park.

"If they killed their cockroaches, if they used the toilets for what toilets are supposed to be used for, if they spent five minutes washing a window, then they would see the park. These sons of bitches," Mr. Winna said, "they are like people dropped into the bottom of a well. They don't want to climb in New York, hand over hand, head over head. I give them a clean room, I give them the park, and in twenty-four hours you can't walk into the room. They shit and piss in everything but the toilet bowl. Let me tell you what some other landlords won't tell you. I took over

this building eight years ago. There were old ladies living in here. Old ladies and old men and some people who still went to business. And then they got out as though they were running from a fire. Their faces changed. They looked like people who see a cliff falling on them. Some couldn't find any rooms and they died before they could even learn where to buy a good meal on their social security payments. What did they run from? What was the fire? This great city didn't have enough of everything else. It had to have more people on relief than any other city in the world. So it announced in Puerto Rico and it announced in the South, come to New York City and live for nothing, and whole families came, more men came than live in the city of Poughkeepsie. The story was announced that you had to be in New York for only one day and you could get more money than you could ever get by working and you could pay rents that only a man could pay who owned ten whores. And now New York City, if I read my newspaper correctly, has two hundred thousand children and mothers on relief. Two hundred thousand women and children. One hundred and fifty thousand babies, if I read my newspaper correctly. And who makes the babies? These babies who would be better off if they were strangled now instead of later. Who makes the babies? The men who come here at night to sneak into the rooms, who leave babies like they leave their dirty underwear. And every son-of-a-bitching building inspector comes in here and thinks I should give him \$50 for not noticing a loose wire hanging from the ceiling. They think I sit here fat and rich. I give my tenants clean sheets and they cut them up for Kotex. I give them a lock on the front door and in fifteen minutes some dope peddler has it broken.

Look into the courtyard and see the garbage dumped out of the windows. The furniture is all broken. My water bill looks as though a dam broke loose. I have fifty building violations and one hundred and fifty human violations. One hundred and fifty bastard children. And do you know what, they don't respect you, they don't respect the police, they don't respect the schoolteachers, just the landlord. And I respect them for what they are—lice. But I don't say a word. I don't say a word about the lady who gets two checks and who has a Buick and a different boy friend every week. I don't say a word about the Puerto Rican girl with two babies who has from five to ten men a night for three dollars a man. I don't say a word about the ladies who go out to clean other people's apartments in the morning and who buy grave plots with their relief checks. Because I don't say a word, people say son-of-a-bitching landlord. But if I say one word, then people will say dead landlord. Would your department give my widow ten cents?"

Mr. Winna looked again at the green of the park.

"The tree grows," he said, "no matter who looks at it. Please forget what I said. I am still not accustomed to what I see. But I am still less accustomed to keeping still. Don't look at these garbage bags. It's easier if they leave them in the hallway instead of dumping them into the court. My super carts everything away by eleven o'clock. If I ever become rich from this house, I'll leave my money to Mt. Sinai anyway."

Mr. Winna started to go down the stairs. He saw me look toward the elevator.

"Don't worry about the elevator," he told me, "it works

perfectly. But I like walking. You burn up more calories climbing stairs than playing golf."

Mr. Winna was gone, down the stairs to sit in his cage on the lobby floor.

I looked for 5DE. I knocked on the door and when the door opened I saw Miss Fletcher had taken possession of her room by washing the window. The window seemed excited to get the attention of the sun, and caught the sun like a boy playing with a magnifying glass. I noticed the floor had been washed. And the entire room smelled of Clorox. A big quart bottle stood on top of the refrigerator.

I sat down by the open window and looked up at the chest of drawers to see a framed photograph of Figueroa.

Miss Fletcher turned off the sink faucets and wiped her hands on a paper towel. She pointed to the photograph.

"I thought I should have it in case Ellen ever asks me what her father looked like."

"You don't think you'll see Figueroa again?"

"He was here last night."

"Did he stay?"

"He told me that I shouldn't tell you. But he did."

"Where did the baby sleep?"

"I fixed up one of the drawers from the chest."

"He left his necktie here. That's usually enough to close a case. Look—" I pointed to the chair alongside the bed. The chair was pushed up against the bed in case the baby rolled. But month-old babies seldom roll. They're too busy remaining motionless, accustoming themselves to the turn of the earth. The earth does revolve, you know. We do go spinning through space. We aren't just here. But out there. And for no reason, but as clearly as Figueroa's striped

rep tie, I saw one of the delights of my teens. The view of the earth from the top of the soil. Right here now at the point of the top of our head there is nothing in between but all creation.

I recognized the tie because I had given it to Figueroa.

Miss Fletcher looked at the tie as though it were still around Figueroa's neck.

"I asked him to stay," Miss Fletcher told me. "I called him up when I didn't hear from you yesterday. I left three messages for you. I wouldn't stay in the first room Mr. Winna gave me. It's across the hall from here. It was worse than the room on Riverside Drive. It was a small room with a single bed and a dirty mattress and dirt that you could feel underfoot. Mr. Winna gave me this room. I didn't want to bother you again with moving so I tried to wash it down. You can smell the Clorox. The windows were black. The sink was worse. I couldn't lie down to sleep. I went out into the hallway and I thought I had stepped into some East Harlem pit. There were women screaming and a lot of drunken men and you could smell marijuana as thick as incense. The stairs seemed to be crawling with babies. The toilets were flooded. I saw a dozen faces high from dope. One tried to grab me but I got rid of him by telling him I had to phone St. Luke's Hospital for the baby. That's when I called him. The Chester was never this bad. I don't know what kind of a building this is. It doesn't seem that people live here. There was broken glass on the stairs. I saw two men passing heroin. Then one of the girls told me that the checks had come in the morning. She said it's like this on the third and eighteenth of each month."

"Check day," I told Miss Fletcher.

"But it wasn't this way at the Chester."

"Zeussa only has quiet drunks at the Chester and he keeps out the narcotics."

"The same girl told me it would be quiet in the morning. But I had the night to get through. Figueroa came over and I felt all right in the room."

"What did Figueroa say?"

"Just that I shouldn't tell you that he slept with me."

"I thought he didn't want to see you again?"

"I just told him that he had to come."

"Are you going to stay here?"

"I want to move."

"You can move. But just wait until your first check comes. Pay Winna what you owe him and move out. But find a room on your own. You should be able to smell out these buildings now. Pick a good one and move in."

Miss Fletcher picked up Figueroa's necktie. She folded the tie and put the tie in a drawer.

"Is it true," she asked, "that my case can be closed just because he stayed with me?"

"It is true."

"But not for last night?"

"Last night was guard duty. Look," I told Miss Fletcher, "in a couple of days you're going to get a lot of money. The money is to buy pots and pans, dishes, bottles, clothes for the baby, a crib, and a carriage. Don't pay Figueroa back his \$20 and don't put any of the money aside. Go out and buy everything on the list that I'm sending you. Just make sure that you have it. But don't buy anything until you move out of here. Because whatever you buy will be stolen from this room. In buildings like this they'll steal your dirty diapers. Find yourself a first-rate building. Just for-

get that you're getting money on assistance. Pretend that you're looking for an apartment on your own. And you want the best. Don't think that you have to look at these holes just because you're getting the money for free. It's not free. Nothing is for free. Least of all the things that we think are free."

I opened my black notebook.

"I want to find your father," I told Miss Fletcher.

"Why?" she asked. Her face rushed from the baby on the bed, to Figueroa's picture, to the window, to the fire escapes outside the window, to the wall of windows, to my face, looking for her father's face in the room to speak for her. "I don't even know," she said, "what my father looks like."

"You never saw him?"

"I can't even force myself to remember him. But why do you want to find him now? And how can you? They could never find him on Mother's case."

"Maybe he left you money. Maybe he'd like to help you. Maybe he wants a grandchild. Maybe you've got veterans' benefits or social security."

"I wouldn't know how to start to find him."

"What do you know about him for a fact?"

"His name."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Would you want to see him now?"

"I tried to find him."

"When?"

Miss Fletcher's face was as pained as a woman who has been led on to thrust her hips upward. Who only asks that you don't fail her. It was the first time she had looked

fully at me since I saw her in Figueroa's room. She couldn't phrase the question. But she could put me to the test. Not the test of the bed. But the sadder test. To try to talk to me across the distance between where she stood and where I sat. The only distance for which there is no measurement.

"How much goes into the record?" Miss Fletcher asked.

"Just tell me and it won't go in."

"I don't care if it goes in. I just don't want to keep telling it. I know how it affects my mother when she has to tell what happened to her over and over. Every three months the same questions. I know it's routine. But when you hear the questions it's as though you've done nothing for three months except wait for the questions. That's the way it used to bother Mother. She would be frantic after the investigator left. She'd go off for the night and get herself bedded down. That would quiet her. But we used to fight about it. Terrible fights. I remember screaming at my mother, Ma, you're not a whore, you're not a whore, why don't you just get one man, live with him here. She flung herself on me and we had a fight. Only I didn't fight back. I just got out of the house. I started walking up Lexington Avenue. Up that big hill that begins on 103rd Street. It was about ten o'clock at night. I walked from East Harlem into 96th Street and then got into the streets of Lexington Avenue where you knew there wasn't a hill between East Harlem and the East Side but a mountain that got taller the longer you climbed up it. I kept walking and walking up Lexington Avenue into 86th Street and 72nd Street and it wasn't until I got to 57th Street that the roaring in my head began to stop. All the time I was walking I just kept seeing my mother and hearing all the words about what a mother is supposed to be. But I didn't

really talk it. It was a sound that made words. A low humming buzzing sound. I didn't know where I was walking to, but the longer I walked the more I felt I was rushing toward something. It was when I got past 42nd Street that I fell down and collapsed. I woke up at Bellevue Hospital. A doctor started talking to me at Bellevue, something like the way you talked to me at first in Figueroa's room, a little rough but to the point to get to the point. I went home after three days. This doctor arranged for me to come and talk. I used to go twice a week. The talking helped me. I didn't fight back at my mother. I began to appreciate the fact that she kept me alive when I was just like Ellen is now. Flat, helpless on her back. She had to give me to my aunt in Cleveland when she came on to New York. That's what a lot of colored people do. The mothers always think somebody else will be better for their children. Maybe the aunt in Cleveland or Buffalo or Chicago will have one more room or more meat on the table. I know my mother is always trying. That's what the doctor explained to me. Even when she beds down with a lot of men she's trying. She's trying to find the right man. It's not the right way and it's not the best way and it only leads to what she is now, but she's trying. Something still burns in her head. And she's alive for me. That's why I don't want to hurt her now with Ellen or Figueroa or investigators. The doctor at Bellevue told me he had been in a German camp where they took the women and the children and tied them to posts and then set wild dogs on them and the dogs tore them to pieces. I can't even imagine that. But I can't imagine him inventing such a story. So it must be true. I know he just told me that so I

would know how rough living can get. East Harlem isn't a German camp. But it's worse. Because in East Harlem the sun is shining and there's not a gate or a lock or a machine-gun post. I just mean that my mother lives as though she's in some kind of prison. I'm beginning to feel that I'm in prison. I don't even look up at the sky now. Because I don't feel that I have a right. When I started walking up Lexington Avenue I knew what the roaring was in my head. I wanted to find my father. I saw him six feet one inch tall, weighing, as my mother told me, about one hundred and eighty-five pounds. He always wore a white shirt and a blue double-breasted suit. His hair was the color of beach sand. His eyes were hazel. He walked with a big step and he liked to smoke when he walked. She had a record of his voice that was made once in an arcade in Cleveland. I knew his voice. I wanted to find him so that he could silence my mother. So that he could keep her in one bed. And I wanted to see him to know where I had come from. I didn't find my father but I learned how not to look for him."

The baby stirred. The wind moved the limp curtains. A roach caught Miss Fletcher's attention. A big roach with its sack of eggs dragging out of its body. Miss Fletcher hesitated to step on the roach. But habit was strong. And the roach died. The sack of eggs slipped out of the body and lay on the floor. Miss Fletcher picked up the roach and the sack of eggs and wiped the floor with a Kleenex. The running water of the sink carried away the roach and its eggs. Miss Fletcher washed her hands and dried them on a paper towel. It would have been crazy for her to say that she was sorry she had killed the roach, because

I could see more roaches crawling up the wall and the can of Dro rested on the sink. But she looked at me as though she should apologize for having killed the roach.

The dead roach broke up the song of her father. Miss Fletcher sat down on the cane chair and looked at her baby and then at the partitioned wall that cheated her out of eight more feet of room. Her body looked like a sack flung out of a window.

"Do you know," Miss Fletcher told me, "I've told that story about my father at least a hundred times to myself. More. I think I told it a hundred times when I was pregnant with Ellen. I would go to sleep and the story would be waiting there in my head as regular as the pillow. I would just automatically start telling it, the way I've heard people talk when they're troubled about something. They just repeat and repeat. And the more troubled they are, the more they repeat. I began to try and look into the story. But there wasn't any looking into it. It was like a box without any openings. I tried imagining what I would do if I actually met my father. He'd be about forty-five now. He might even be living in New York now. He could. Who doesn't live in New York? Why do people come here? Why did my mother come? Why do I stay?"

Miss Fletcher looked at me as though I could pull a zipper and allow life to breathe more easily. Or at least knock down the partition and give her eight more feet of room. The three-quarter bed and the sink bowl was the width of the room. I absolutely cannot understand why we live as we do. But I try, like the ant, the grasshopper, and the wild duck. I wanted to know what other memorabilia Miss Fletcher had of her father.

"He owned a Buick," Miss Fletcher told me.

"How do you know?"

"My mother told me she brought me home from St. Ann's Hospital in his Buick."

"Did your aunt in Cleveland know your father?"

"She never talked about him. My aunt would only talk about what she called my other father. The real father. The father that a father is supposed to be but can't always be. My aunt would tell me that men had a harder time trying to be fathers than they even had trying to be men. She would read to me out of the big black Bible she kept in the living room. The Bible was always open. She said there was one man who knew what it was to be a father and that man died before he had any children. She said the Hebrews kept having children. Jacob had Joseph. Abraham had Isaac. And that's why the world hasn't been able to destroy the Hebrews. We haven't produced a single father, my aunt would say. We fall apart in each generation, my aunt would say, the son and the father never become a holy spirit. Watch a father with his daughter, my aunt would say, and then watch a father with his son. And whenever I would try to talk to her about my own father, she wouldn't talk about him, she'd only say, the less you know the less you'll have to forget."

Miss Fletcher looked at her baby as though the three wise men had already departed without knowing what to do with their gifts. I am certain the wise men preferred the stables of Arabia to a New York room.

The baby flung its hands up when the wind sucked the curtains out of the window. The sky darkened as quickly as a face that hears its own thunder. The thunder didn't announce itself but thundered into the room. The roaring thunder of a summer cloudburst. The wind swept

the rain into the room and I pulled down the newly washed window. The rain swept across the tops of the buildings. The street in the rainy darkness looked like an embedded street in Pompeii. You had to call on history to see people living in the buildings linked together by dangling fire escapes. Across the top of the sky I could see the sun beginning to challenge the summer burst. The sun advanced on the darkened plain of the sky. The wind fled from the tops of the buildings. The storm ended almost as quickly as the baby's shriek.

The sun claimed the plain. The brilliant light gave a grandeur to the fire escapes. Only the twilight and only a brilliant sun after a rain-washed sky can give a place in the sun to New York.

Miss Fletcher attended to her baby. I wanted to hear more about her aunt in Cleveland. The aunt who could talk about the father, the son, and our needed holy spirit in a language that has become as remote as our ability to make arrowheads. But the speech of the aunt was no longer on Miss Fletcher's face. Her face was busy with the instant. The baby's diaper.

I picked up my black notebook and got ready to leave. I had enough information to make an attempt to find her father. The possession of a Buick links a man to the file cabinets.

Miss Fletcher turned toward me with a question.

"Would it be all right—" And the question hung on Figueroa.

"Would it be all right," Miss Fletcher asked, "if Figueroa stays here again tonight with me?"

10 Figueroa telephoned me at 10 A.M. to tell me that he hadn't slept with Miss Fletcher. "Look," he told me, "that girl wants me for a father. I don't want her cut off and I don't want to be cut off. The Federal men raided the room next to her at three in the morning. They grabbed a couple of guys. Tell her to put my name on the birth certificate and I'll get her a faked marriage certificate made up in Harlem for ten dollars."

"She wants a father for her baby," I told Figueroa. "What's wrong with that?"

"She wants a father for herself. The baby can wait. Can you tell her to let up on me?"

"I can't tell her what to do."

"You can tell her which of her teeth to brush. I just called you before that landlord Mr. Winna gets on the phone if he doesn't get into Miss Fletcher. He's a son of a bitch. That house of his belongs in the Bronx Zoo."

"Is she going to move?"

"The minute the check comes. There are more junkies in that building than on Rikers Island."

"Did you get to the clinic?" I asked Figueroa.

"I want one more week without knowing. I'll get there on Monday. When are you going to be around to the Chester?"

"In a couple of days."

"I'll see you then."

"Before you hang up," I said, "do you know anything about Miss Fletcher's father that you haven't told me?"

"Just that he was the first guy to lay her mother. But not the last."

I returned to my desk and the PHS-52 form I had ready for Juan Pupa and Chata Lugo and their children, if necessary. The form is an application for voluntary admission to a U. S. Public Health Service Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, or Fort Worth, Texas, for narcotic addiction.

Mrs. Lugo was waiting for me in Service. She came in to tell me Antonio her sixteen-year-old nephew had been arrested on West 84th Street for narcotics. He was being held in Brooklyn in a special prison for children. Antonio's father was Pedro who was doing four years in Michigan on a narcotic charge. Mrs. Lugo had eight children. Two by Rico, four by Hector, and two by Juan Pupa. Pupa was a little man who weighed about 150 pounds. He last worked two weeks in 1952. He had two children with Mrs. Lugo, three children with Dolores, and two children with Frieda who was in a mental institution in Puerto Rico. Mr. Pupa had threatened to kill his last investigator but he told me that he didn't speak English, so how could he call on the telephone and say, I'm going to kill you you son of

a bitch if you bother me about going to work. I guessed Pupa was on narcotics when he began getting behind in his rent. He owed one months' rent on West 83rd Street and the landlord refused to accept the rent payment. He preferred to see Pupa out of his house. The landlord told me he was frightened of Pupa. "That little son of a son of a bitch looks like a knife aimed at you. He's the kind that kills and that says, what did I do? In the meanwhile you're dead and this little pig is being examined by a court psychiatrist. I want him out. I'd give him the one months' rent to get out. I don't want him to remember my name or face." The landlord walked with me to the corner of West 83rd Street to get out of Pupa's listening range. "The bastard might have ears like a bat. Listen," the landlord told me, "I can't prove anything and I'm not saying anything for the record, but there is something sick between these two. They're perfect for each other. They're like pus coming out of a festered sore. I don't know what the hell they do but when I used to go into their room for the rent I'd feel like I was chewing on an apple filled with worms. You know how the snifters use dope. It comes in white envelopes. His god-damn room is filled with the envelopes. The kids play with them on the floor. They probably sniff up the stuff. I was going to call the police but I figured he was just one of a lot and why should I see my grave before I'm finished paying for it."

I picked up the forms on my desk and went down to Service to see Mrs. Lugo. Mrs. Lugo's eyes were red from weeping. She tried to smile when she saw me. I liked Mrs. Lugo. She preferred telling me the truth. But she always lied about Mr. Pupa. She had selected Mr. Pupa to carry her, like those red ants you can see in the summer dirt

dragging flies and vast stalks of limp weed. Mrs. Lugo spoke English. She and I could talk without the separation of language.

Mrs. Lugo held a long white envelope. She handed the envelope to me. The form letter said Antonio had been arrested and was being detained.

"Was he using it or selling it?" I asked.

"I don't know what he did, I think he carried some around the block for a man. The man would give him fifty cents or a dollar."

"You expected it?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I know."

"What about Mr. Pupa?"

"He's at home with the children."

"Why in the hell do you stay with him?"

"He's good to the children. I don't have anyone in New York to look after them. If he wasn't good to the children, I would leave him."

"But this." I glanced toward her arm.

"This is nothing."

"Not when they catch you."

"They like to make something terrible out of it. It is terrible. But not the way they think."

Mrs. Lugo wore her hair parted softly in the center, gathered up in bun. She wore gold-framed glasses. She always looked dirty, but she always looked as though she didn't have to be dirty. She wore a cotton sweater streaked with dirt and a cotton skirt that looked like a bed sheet. Her own bed sheets were always foul. Her three rooms were always dirty but exactly dirty. She made no error. She wanted all of her filth on the outside. Because she just didn't have room inside of her. I think we have something

like nine billion nerve cells. And Mrs. Lugo seemed to be using all of them to confuse her life so that no part could look back on itself.

"Are you still on the stuff?" I asked Mrs. Lugo.

"I stopped taking it when the baby was born. I didn't take anything when I was pregnant. I didn't want the baby to be born sick."

"And Pupa?"

"I don't know about him."

"He takes narcotics."

"I think he does. But let him tell you."

"Where does he get the money?"

"I don't know what he does. I know he's good to the children."

"How is he good to the children?"

"He watches them."

"You think that's enough?"

"Who else is there to watch them?"

"Why don't you go back to Puerto Rico?"

"Do you think Puerto Rico is waiting for me? Puerto Rico is warm. But only for the tourists. It has beautiful mountains. But only for the tourists. It has fine hotels. But only the tourists live in them. It has good food. But only the tourists see it on their plates. Puerto Rico is no good, Mr. Phillips. It is only good for people who have money. Nobody else. Do you know how my family lives? Eight of them live in what you call a shack. My father sometimes makes eight dollars a week. My mother had ten children. Now she has tuberculosis. Everybody is sick. I miss the one thing. I don't feel strange in Puerto Rico. The Spanish language is not for New York. It doesn't sound right in the street. It makes all the Puerto Ricans

sound funny. But soon all of New York will be Puerto Rican. Do you know what Mr. Pupa tells me, he says the Negroes and the Puerto Ricans will fight for New York. They will fight for the apartments, the jobs, for every new building that the white people move out of. And he says the Puerto Ricans will win the fight because they haven't learned how to lose or how to fight. The Puerto Ricans come like children to New York. The whole city is waiting ready-made. I think soon the street signs will be in Spanish too. So why should I go back to Puerto Rico?"

"Antonio wouldn't be running narcotics on 84th Street and sitting now in the Brooklyn Detention Center. Or is it the same in Puerto Rico?"

"Can you guess what I wanted to be in Puerto Rico?"

I looked at Mrs. Lugo's gold-rimmed glasses, her hair gathered in a bun.

"Schoolteacher," I said.

Mrs. Lugo got up from the desk. She hurried over to the window. I hurried after her. The guard saw us hurrying toward the window and I waved him to sit down. I caught up with Mrs. Lugo. She had her hands over her face. Her hands were wet from the tears. She leaned against the window sill.

"I wanted to be a schoolteacher," Mrs. Lugo said. "I had two years of studying toward a teacher. How did you guess?"

"I just guessed."

"You don't know more?"

"I guessed. Your voice is soft. You know how to speak. You know how to listen. You see more than you talk about. You hear more than what I say. I guess that's why

I guessed. Teachers have to hear what children don't know how to say. They have to see what children want them to see without showing it."

I could see Mrs. Lugo's arm in the sunlight. I could see the punctures in her arm. I could see a sore beginning to fester.

"You've got an infection," I told Mrs. Lugo.

"I want to die. But I want to die so that God won't be ashamed of me." Mrs. Lugo swayed. She looked limp. She sat down at the table in front of the window.

"I think it is funny that I take narcotics," she told me. "The newspapers make it seem so bad. Antonio's father gave it to me."

"Do you still take it?"

"Yes."

"Then where do you get the money to buy it? You can't buy it on the money you get from us."

Mrs. Lugo gave me a tired smile. "Where does anybody get anything?" she asked me.

"All right," I said, "so you take it and Pupa takes it and Antonio takes it and Antonio's father took it and Antonio has probably given some to his young cousin Hermino and maybe you even used some to put some of the babies to sleep. That's what it's for. To put people to sleep."

"Do you think I sleep?" Mrs. Lugo asked.

"Do you want to sleep?" I asked her.

"When I can wake up, yes. Mr. Pupa sleeps naked. The babies all sleep naked. I wake up before Mr. Pupa. When I see everybody sleeping naked I think we are all dead. That's the way it is in the morning. Then Mr. Pupa gets up. He doesn't wash when he gets up. He goes naked

into the kitchen and he heats the coffee. He makes corn flakes for Antonio, Hermino, and Hector, and they go to school. I sit with Mr. Pupa in the kitchen. He makes coffee for us. He likes to chatter. He is like a woman. I think that's why I stay with him. Not because he is a man but because he is a woman. He chatters all morning. He doesn't like to leave the house. He likes to smoke until all of the cigarettes are gone. I don't know how he finds so much to talk about. He doesn't see people, he doesn't go to the movies, he never looks at a newspaper, he has no friends, he never watches the TV. When he finishes the cigarettes he boils the needle. He likes to watch me use the needle. He never does it with a needle. I think his face is wonderful when he gets ready to watch me. It is like a little boy seeing a marvel. The needle goes into your arm like a man and it is just as quick and just as over as a man. It is only terrible because you know that you want something that is nothing. That is the most terrible part. And I talk to you like a woman taking off her clothes in front of her husband."

Mrs. Lugo stopped, then said, "Now what can you tell me?"

"Just about this."

I put the PHS form down on the table. Mrs. Lugo picked up the form and she saw the words, Lexington, Kentucky.

"You know what this is?" I asked.

"Yes, it's for Kentucky."

"You weren't ever there?"

"No, but I heard a lot about Kentucky."

"You can go, you know, if you want to."

Mrs. Lugo pushed the form back to me, as though holding it meant she had to go.

"You know how we live now," I told Mrs. Lugo, "we keep signing our names to applications. Sometimes our entire life can be changed because we did or didn't sign our name at the right time. This is the kind of paper that might be able to help you. There's nobody in New York to really help you. You can get a lot of talk but no real help. You can get a thousand people to tell you what you already know about narcotics. But there's nobody who can make Pupa boil a pot of tea for you instead of a needle."

Mrs. Lugo took up the form. I could see the words, WHO MAY APPLY. Any person who habitually uses narcotic drugs specified by Federal law, which includes the following drugs: Cocaine, Coca leaves, Codeine, Dihydrocodeinone (Dicodid, Hycodan), Dihydromorphinone (Dilaudid), Heroin, Indian Hemp (marihuana), Laudanum, Meperidine (Demerol, Isonipeccaine), Methadon (Dolophine), Metopon, Morphine, Opium, Pantopon, Paregoric, Peyote (mescaline), NU-2206 (3-Hydroxy-N-Methyl-Morphinan). Any other narcotic drug, the sale of which may by Executive Order and/or presidential proclamation be brought under the Harrison Narcotic Act. And if you used Alcohol, Benzedrine, Amytal, Bromides, Chloral Hydrate, Phenobarbital, Seconal, or any other sleeping pill or barbiturate, you weren't eligible. By definition you were an addict if you habitually used any habit-forming narcotic drugs as to endanger the public morals, health, safety, or welfare, or if you were so far addicted to habit-forming narcotic drugs as to have lost power of self-control with reference to the addiction. You

could either pay or go in free. If you could afford to pay, the charge was seven dollars a day and you had to deposit \$210 on arrival at the hospital, plus the approximate cost of the return transportation to where you came from, West 117th Street. The average length of hospitalization required to effect a cure was approximately six months. And if you couldn't pay seven dollars a day, you could go in free. I read the back of the form while Mrs. Lugo studied the application.

Mrs. Lugo looked up from the addict form at the people seated on the benches in the Service room as though the form should be passed out at the reception desk like popcorn. Her face had the look of why me. She drew herself into the chair with the lesson taught us by the turtle. Mrs. Lugo heard a threat. Trumpets sounded in her ears. The great sounding brass warned her of the enemy. What enemy? What banners did he carry? Who were the terrible knights with horses beginning to break into a gallop, their lances lowered, the ten thousand lances leveled for the flesh of Mrs. Lugo? Where could she sit and hear the voice of the turtle?

"Will they take my babies from me?" Mrs. Lugo asked. "I don't want to give away my babies, Mr. Phillips."

"The babies would have to be placed. You couldn't expect Pupa to look after them."

"And I can get them back?"

"Of course."

"But sometimes you can't get your babies back!"

"You'll be able to get your babies back. Why do you want them back?" I asked Mrs. Lugo. "What are you going to do with your babies?"

Mrs. Lugo looked up at me as though I could be the enemy.

"Do you see me now?" she asked. "Will they make me different in Kentucky?"

"I don't know what they can do for you in Kentucky. It's up to you. Lexington isn't a factory. They don't fix up people. You've got to do the fixing. Let's start with Hermino. What about him?" Hermino was eleven years old. He went to PS 105. He had a bright face. He could translate beautifully from Spanish into English. His father was Pedro. His form 700 said he had lice, worms, was sullen, didn't speak to other children, fought with his brother, ignored his lessons, refused to speak English, spit at his teachers, his body smelled, and his clothes were foul.

"Hermino," Mrs. Lugo said, as though she just remembered she had a son named Hermino.

"I can't say anything," Mrs. Lugo said, "I must talk to Mr. Pupa. Will you come to the house?"

"Why do you need Pupa?"

"Because he's the only person I talk to in New York."

"Would Pupa go to Lexington?"

"I can't speak for him."

"Would you go?"

"I can't speak for myself."

"Who will speak for you then?"

"I will talk to God tonight. In Puerto Rico I talked to God when I was a girl. You believed that God could be on top of the mountains. But here in New York I never think about God. This is not a place for God. I haven't seen one church in New York that I could walk in. I don't

know a priest. I sometimes think the priests should come into buildings like mine. They should knock on each door, come in, eat rice and beans, and talk so that God comes into the rooms instead of the people having to go out of the rooms to try and find God in dope. You know, Mr. Phillips, narcotics is a religion for many Spanish people and simple people don't know what to do when they have no God. Heroin is like a church. Nobody goes because they're bad. Only to be good. I want to love my children. I know what the man from the SPCC sees. I know how I look when I look on other women. I know women who keep a clean house on the money you give, who dress their children like the American children, who even save money and send it to Puerto Rico. I know it all in my head. The man from the SPCC said I was no good, he said he would take me to court, he said the court could take the children from me, he said Mr. Pupa could go to jail, he said everything I know and nothing that I wanted to hear like a blessing."

Mrs. Lugo turned away from me and faced the freight elevator. The clumsy gray doors pushed open. Mr. Pupa stood in the doorway, looking around the Service floor. He turned toward us and saw Mrs. Lugo. He smiled at me and then seemed to wrap himself around Mrs. Lugo with the long wet tongue of an anteater.

I waved to Pupa to join us. I picked up the application for Lexington, Kentucky, and folded it into eight neat squares to the quick relief of Mrs. Lugo.

Pupa was wearing a zippered jacket, an unpressed plaid sport shirt, a pair of gray cotton pants, a dirty straw hat. Pupa smiled again. His teeth were black and hacked. He slid into a chair and quickly told Mrs. Lugo that Antonio

was only going to be charged as a youthful offender. Mrs. Lugo asked him who was staying with the babies. Pupa told her he gave Mrs. Mercado a pound of surplus butter for watching the babies.

Mrs. Lugo anxiously stood up to go.

"Mrs. Mercado is no good with the babies," she told me. "Mrs. Mercado has TB and she spits on everything."

Pupa smiled at me. I looked at his nostrils that sucked in the heroin. He saw my eyes go to his nostrils. He sneezed.

Mrs. Lugo hid her arms in a green nylon sweater.

"Treat that infection," I told her, pointing to her arm.

Pupa's gray skin pulled tight on his smile. His teeth closed over his lip. His hand shook. His mouth was wet. His head moved slightly to catch the scent. The reflex had settled into his bones. He could hear a threat even if he couldn't hear the voice of the turtle.

"Yes, Mr. Phillips," Mrs. Lugo said quickly, asking to leave, "I'll go to St. Luke's," and to St. Peter's and to St. Thomas and to St. John and to St. Paul.

Pupa and Mrs. Lugo went into the freight elevator.

I went back to my desk and completed the letter I had been writing to the State of Ohio requesting the last known address of Reese Fletcher from the registration of his Buick and I wrote an identical letter to the motor vehicle bureau in Illinois. I wrote to St. Ann's Hospital in Cleveland and I wrote to the Adjutant General's office in Washington, D.C., requesting their last known address for Miss Fletcher's father.

I wrote a memo to the police department requesting a record of their contact with Juan Pupa. I wrote a memo downtown advising that Juan Pupa and Mrs. Lugo were

drug addicts. I wrote to the court requesting a summary of their contact with Antonio. And I prepared a short memo to God, before going down to Chock full o' Nuts to eat a cream cheese sandwich untouched by human hands.

11 When I walked into the Chester I saw two ambulance attendants and a patrolman. Zeussa called me over to the desk. He looked as though the ceiling was going to fall on his head.

"Mrs. Cooper is dead," Zeussa told me, "I just called you at your office but they told me you were out."

"How long?" I asked, as though her death would be any shorter.

"I found her about an hour ago. She was lying on the floor. Mrs. Howe heard her moan but the door was locked. When I got in she wasn't part of us any more. What's it like," Zeussa asked himself, "just to be dead for a minute and to know it? That's what I thought looking at her."

A patrolman came out of the pay booth. The two ambulance attendants and the two patrolmen went up to Mrs. Cooper's room. They carried a canvas bag.

Zeussa watched them go into the elevator. He waited until the elevator had risen, then he leaned toward me

and said, "This is between you and me and that picture of Washington crossing the Delaware."

"What?"

Mrs. Cooper had lived ninety-two years and now she had been dead seventy-five minutes, and the only thing she seemed to have left was a confidence with Zeussa.

"She's been giving me three and four dollars out of each check whenever she could afford it and I've been sending the money over to a funeral parlor for her. She left \$280 with me. She said she didn't want to die and be buried in a sack. So she's got this money. You people won't grab it?"

"No. Call the funeral parlor and tell them to use the money."

"There's nobody to go to her funeral," Zeussa said.

"I'll go," I said.

"I couldn't go," Zeussa said. "Just seeing her on the floor turned my blood into oatmeal."

Isabel came out of the elevator. She came straight toward Zeussa.

"You let people die! You won't paint my room pink!"

She hurried away from the desk toward the corridor that led to the blinding sun on Broadway.

"Jesus!" Zeussa said, "for what? Just to make a living. I was the smart one in our family, I didn't want to be a druggist."

Zeussa pulled out his register book. He opened the book and pointed to a column of names. I recognized almost all of the names on the page.

"The good tenants have to die! I'm going to get rid of all your people," Zeussa told me, "they're nothing but a headache. Now they're sending me all the drunks from the

Bowery. It's not bad enough that a man has tuberculosis, he has to be an alcoholic too. I'll soon have them dying like flies in the rooms. Then some son of a bitch from the rent commission will decide to lower my rents. I don't need it. There must be some respectable people left in New York. People who go to work everyday. So I'll make less money but I'll live longer to spend it. Where do they really come from?" Zeussa asked. "Are they all born like this? You would think their mothers would have squeezed their heads like a bedbug."

"You pick and choose your tenants," I told Zeussa.

"Oh no, you do it for me. Or those crazy nuts downtown. Nobody else but you people would pay \$22.75 a week for one of my rooms. But that's because I let a girl with her four babies sleep in one room. Everybody closes their good eye. Do you know there're more babies living in this building than in my apartment house in Flatbush? And I live in a house that's clean, decent, you don't even know you're paying rent. I go from here to my house and I feel like a man cut into two pieces."

The elevator door opened. The two ambulance attendants came out carrying the gray canvas sack. Mrs. Cooper was in the sack. She made only a slight bulge. Zeussa stared at the sack. I watched the ambulance attendants carry the swaying sack down the corridor and into Broadway. Was she really in the sack? What were they carrying out?

"Why do they use a sack like that?" Zeussa asked me. "Do they carry everybody that way? Look at it! A sack they can stretch to fit everybody. It can be stored in the ambulance waiting for the next one. I'm not going to die if I have to go that way. I'll fool them."

Zeussa looked toward his container of coffee. But he also looked as though he would throw up whatever he tried to put in his stomach. He wiped his forehead and his hands.

"Why didn't she buy a TV set with the money?" Zeussa looked at his gold wrist watch and listened to the tick. "It all goes on without her. Nothing stopped but Mrs. Cooper." Zeussa felt his heart. "If you miss two ticks, you're done for. Even one. You don't get a second chance. Why don't we all live like Gary Cooper!"

"Did she ever get any mail?" I asked Zeussa.

"Mrs. Cooper—Gary Cooper. Now I know I have to give that psychiatrist \$15 an hour. What the hell, it costs me almost that much to sit in a barber shop for an hour. No, Mrs. Cooper didn't get any mail. She didn't get a letter in the ten years I've been here, except from you people. She never had a visitor. She never got a phone call. She was a perfect tenant. She told me five years ago that she buried everyone that she ever knew."

"I know the record doesn't list any relatives."

"None of these people have relatives. They're all chopped off like the head of a fish."

I told Zeussa to telephone the funeral parlor and tell them Mrs. Cooper was dead and to give her a funeral for the money she had on deposit. I asked Zeussa to telephone me and give me the date of the funeral. I left the Chester without making any visits. I came to see Figueroa, but I didn't feel like talking to him after seeing Mrs. Cooper carried out in the canvas sack.

I walked out of the Chester and I saw Isabel standing on the Broadway sidewalk near the curb. She hurried over to take my hand. Her face in the bright sun looked like a

doll's face that had been hammered to pieces. Her mouth opened on her one tooth and the flat gums couldn't form all of her words. She always dressed in spiked shoes and bits of silk that looked as though they came out of an attic trunk. She tottered like a little girl in the spiked shoes.

"He won't paint my room, Mr. Phillips. And now I'm going to move away from here. I don't want them to carry me out in a sack. Where will they bury me, Mr. Phillips? Will I know where?"

"You're not dying," I tried to tell her.

"But I will. We all die, don't we? Every person on this street. But nobody looks as though they know they're going to die. When do you know, Mr. Phillips?"

"You don't have to think about it."

"But I have nobody to tell me. I don't talk to the people in this building. It used to be a nice building when I first moved in. But now I don't even use the toilet. I have a commode in my room. A baby's potty. I saw Mrs. Cooper in the morning. She was frying an egg in the kitchen. Did she eat the egg and then die? Would she have eaten the egg if she knew she was going to die? I saw her drive away in the truck. Where do they take her to?"

"Downtown" was all I could think of saying.

"And from there she goes up to God. Do you have to go into the earth first before you go to God? How soon do you go to God? I don't know what to do in between. I don't even know how to die, Mr. Phillips. Who will tell me how?"

"You—"

But Isabel interrupted me. "Who put Mrs. Cooper into the canvas sack? Why was she put into a sack? She was an old lady, a nice old lady, she wasn't garbage! You

carry out garbage in a sack. Mr. Phillips, don't let them put me into a sack! Please put it into my record, that I don't want to be put into a sack. I want to be put under green grass. Look, Mr. Phillips, where do they bury people in New York? In Europe I knew. I could see. But here. I never see. Sometimes I think we are thrown into a furnace to make steam for the buildings."

She pointed to the subway.

"Or into the subways. Please promise me, Mr. Phillips, that you will put it in my record. Please be good to me. Be a nice good man. Be a lovely man. Be a good man for me. I will say a prayer for you. I will make you a scarf for the winter. Buy me the wool and I will knit you a beautiful scarf. I don't think all people are put into a sack. Only those people who become garbage. I'm not a piece of garbage, Mr. Phillips. I have a fine family. I have a house in Europe. I have a sister in England. I have my God that I pray to. I have my room that I keep neat and I wash my floor."

She rushed into the lobby so that I wouldn't see her doll clothes change into a shroud.

I saw Petra, waving, coming toward me looking as though she was going to live forever. Her face had lost the ash gray. Her little girl Alida was carrying a box of Cracker Jack. Petra smiled when she saw me. She came hurrying up the Broadway sidewalk. Alida showed me the prize she got in her box of Cracker Jack.

"Mr. Phillips, I'm so glad to see you. I don't want to kill my little girl any more."

Alida gave me a Cracker Jack.

"You look good. When did you pick up Alida?"

"Two days ago. Look." Petra opened her purse. She

took out a box of pills. "I don't take aspirin any more. I take these pills that they gave me at the hospital. They cost fifty cents a piece. But they make me as quiet as a girl before her confirmation. The aspirin only made me sick."

"What else did the doctors do?"

"A nice man talked to me. He talked to me everyday. He knew more about me, Mr. Phillips, more than any man who ever gave me babies." Petra smiled in awe of her jostle. "He told me the noises in my head would go away. The second day they went away. So many men talked to me. I asked for aspirins but they gave me these wonderful pills. What do they put in them, Mr. Phillips?"

"Medicine."

"I think they put their nice words into the pills. When I take one I talk and talk to myself about my troubles and all the troubles seem faraway. So faraway that I don't think they can hear me any more and then I can sleep. And I don't smell the gas any more, Mr. Phillips. And I never tell Alida that I am going to stick her head in the oven. But she is still trouble for me. She still plays in the hallway. She still runs under my feet. I have to shout at her."

Alida held onto my hand and she swung herself back and forth.

"You see," Petra told me, "she can't be quiet for a minute. And I need my quiet. My life has been all trouble, Mr. Phillips, I have had much trouble, now I want it to be quiet, because I am afraid of what will happen if I don't take the pills. I don't want to smell the gas. I don't want to kill Alida. I love my baby, Mr. Phillips. That's why I called you today but they said you were out."

Place Alida in a Catholic home. The doctors said I have to talk to them twice a week. I can't keep Alida this way."

"Did they say you could work?"

"No, look at my feet." Petra showed me her legs wrapped up with bandages like World War I puttees. "I can't rush rush and that's the way it was when I worked. Every minute belongs to the boss."

Alida ran from Petra's side to a girl who rode up in a tricycle.

"Alida!" She rushed over to Alida and hit her hard across her shoulders. Alida didn't cry.

"This is no street for babies, Mr. Phillips. Why do they let babies on this street? If they didn't let babies here then I wouldn't live here. You see, Mr. Phillips, I love my pills but I am afraid of them. I am afraid that they will leave me like a stone on the beach. Try to place Alida for me in a nice Catholic home."

Alida touched the girl's tricycle. The girl shoved Alida. Alida fell down crying.

"Alida!" Petra picked up Alida and hit her across the mouth. Alida whimpered. The girl rode away on her tricycle.

"When will you come to see me, Mr. Phillips?"

"Soon." I gave Alida two packs of bubble gum. Petra took Alida's hand and crossed with the light for West 104th Street.

Mrs. Cooper had knives, forks, dishes, clothes, she had a wardrobe trunk in one corner of her room. She had a milk-glass lamp. What would happen to the knives, forks, dishes, clothes, the wardrobe trunk, the milk-glass lamp? Who finally decided what to do with her pots and pans? I

didn't know. I went back into the Chester to ask Zeussa.

"You can't stay away," Zeussa greeted me. "Why don't you rent a room? You know, we have penthouses in this place. One man, Mr. Roberts, has been living in two rooms in the penthouse for eighteen years and he only pays \$11 a week. It costs me \$29 a week to keep him in those rooms."

"I want to know what happens to Mrs. Cooper's room. Tell me, what finally happens to her stuff? Who decides what to do with it?"

"The police. They seal up the room. If there's anything worth taking, they take it down to the precinct. Then the relatives can claim it. If not, then the police hold it. Then the State of New York gets it. But she only had junk in her room. A secondhand dealer wouldn't give you five dollars for her stuff. Why do you ask? Do you think she had some IBM stock?"

"I was just wondering how a life finally comes to an end."

Zeussa looked as though the canvas sack was being flung over his head. I could see that the end of life for him meant toppling off into space. His container of coffee reassured him that the world was still round. But only for a swift quick swallow.

"I'll bet that psychiatrist tells me to give up this work," Zeussa told me. "I'll be down then to see you people."

"It can happen," I told Zeussa.

"I won't see the day! Every week I put away \$50 in the Manufacturer's Trust and I tell the teller this is to keep me off the budget." Zeussa's eye caught the list of names on the open register page. "But eight months in a hospital

would wipe me out! Three shifts of nurses around the clock. One small heart attack. The hospitals make sure that we go naked into the grave!"

Zeussa put both hands on the register as though he were resting them on a Bible.

"I swear," Zeussa said, "that I will take a rope and hang myself in the closet before I let my good friend life play any of its tricks on me. I see enough to know the handwriting. Like the doctors when they learn they have cancer. They give themselves nice pleasant medicines that put them to sleep forever."

A patrolman came into the lobby to put Mrs. Cooper's life finally to an end. Zeussa gave him a key to Mrs. Cooper's room. I rode up in the elevator with the patrolman. I looked at the key in the patrolman's hand. New York had a warehouse of pots and pans, wardrobe trunks, milk-glass lamps, an enormous pile of potsherds that the police property office catalogued like an expedition into the Sinai.

The patrolman went to Mrs. Cooper's room and I went down two flights and knocked on Figueroa's door.

Figueroa came to the door in a new suit of polished cotton, an iridescent cotton. He wore a tie of cool blue. He had thrown away his nylon shirt and had discovered Swiss voile. When he saw me his hand went to his necktie. His clothing allowance was \$2.15 semimonthly and that wouldn't pay for the necktie. A girl was at his side, young enough for her breasts to be still soaking up Vitamin D. I looked toward her stomach to see if it swelled. Figueroa saw me look and he was quick to be a rooster. The girl didn't look swollen. But she looked soft and ripe. I could see her on the budget.

The girl had a pocketbook in her hand. Figueroa was quick to ask her to wait downstairs in the lobby. The girl didn't move but waited for my permission. I told her it would just take a few minutes for me to talk to Figueroa and she looked more relieved than she ought to have shown.

The smell of the girl was in the room. The bed was rumpled and there was lipstick on the pillows.

"Who is she?" I asked Figueroa.

"Just somebody from the Bronx."

"Did you get to the clinic?"

"They said I was clean."

"What was all the blood you were spitting up?"

"They didn't know. They just said my condition was arrested."

"What did you do yesterday morning about finding work?" I asked Figueroa, and the question snapped him away from the iridescent cotton and the cool blue tie.

"Look," Figueroa told me, and I recognized the balking voice, "so far you've been all right to me. I didn't mind your questions and I went along with a lot of what you said about finding work. I know that I have to make a buck. But I came out clean and I didn't have a parole officer to sing to. I wanted a cushion. This has been my cushion. And just because Miss Fletcher got caught is no reason why I'm suddenly going to start buying diapers and talcum powder. She calls me up ten times a day to tell me the baby needs talcum powder and rubber pants. I'm not buying rubber pants. You can tell her for me, and I'm telling you."

"You signed the paper stating you were the father," I reminded Figueroa.

"It wasn't notarized."

"And neither was your arm twisted to sign it. The signature is yours. It's all in the record."

"The court can decide that."

"They can."

"You know what happened here today. Mrs. Cooper died. The one who was ninety. I helped Zeussa get into her room. He couldn't open the lock. The dead ones shake him up. And me too. I saw her dead on the floor and the dead look dead. She had an egg on her table that she never finished eating. She had a piece of bread in her hand that she couldn't get to her mouth. You're a long time dead and you've got a short time to buy a new blue necktie. I paid \$1.99 for it at Macy's." Figueroa straightened his tie. "I intend to keep on buying neckties and not diapers."

I saw a small white envelope on the floor. Just the kind of envelope described to me by Juan Pupa's landlord on West 83rd Street. And under the bed, just under the rail, I saw a second envelope. Figueroa saw me fix on the envelopes.

"The girl's," he told me, "the one who just went downstairs," and his voice was no longer angry against Miss Fletcher but full of knowledge. "When you've been scored by your father every night for a couple of years with your mother watching, you get some funny ideas about how to get through a day. She went from hemp to heroin like Peter to Paul. I was just leaving now with her to put her on a subway back to the Bronx. I've had enough of her. She came out with this story last night. Her father got into her when she was ten years old. Her mother encouraged the bastard because it meant she didn't have to put out and worry about getting more kids. The three of

them slept in the same bed. The father's in Rockland State Hospital now. The mother took off. The girl lives with three other girls in the East Bronx. They're all on the stuff. They all work for an insurance company as typists. And the minute I heard her whole story I started to hustle her out of here. I don't want to sit in Dannemora again."

"And how did you get the suit?"

"A guy I know got picked up. He's good for two to five. We're both the same size. I was with him when he picked out this suit. He couldn't get out of the Tombs to get the suit. He told me to pick up the suit and keep it."

"What's his name?"

"Frank."

"When was he arrested?"

"About five days ago."

"Is he still in the Tombs?"

"I talked to him there yesterday."

"And what store did you get the suit?"

"Gimbels."

"Can I see the label?"

Figuroa unbuttoned the two top buttons. He carefully opened the jacket and showed me the Gimbels label.

Figuroa sat down on the edge of the bed. He shoved away the blanket so that the lint wouldn't get on his suit. He leaned toward me, his hands on his thighs. His eyes were wide and he wet his lips. He rocked slightly, as though to get his balance, or to feel my weight. He bent down, picked up the small white envelope on the floor, held it to his nose, and sniffed upward like a bull catching a scent. He crumpled the envelope in his fist. He picked

up a pillow and uncovered a second white envelope. He handed the envelope to me. I opened the envelope. It had heroin in it.

"Sniff it," he said.

"No thanks," I said, and I handed the envelope back to Figueroa.

"That envelope I just sniffed was empty. The girl took up everything. She forgot this envelope. She was saving this one before she got into the subway to go back to the Bronx. But your knock on the door threw her off. I just want you to know all this because I'm going to make it and make it clean."

"To make what?"

"Just to make it."

"And you'd rather buy neckties than diapers?"

"Let me get this girl back to the Bronx and then I'll tell you a long story about Miss Fletcher."

Figueroa had an instinct for bargaining.

12

I filed my papers waiting for Figueroa to telephone. I had a thick wad of correspondence. The letters poured in from Puerto Rico, the Southern States, the three great mental hospitals in New York State, the prisons, minor and great, the public schools on the West Side that sent back their curious reports on the children, the rent commission, the New York Housing Authority that ought to go and do penance for the monstrous harm they did to New York City, the city hospitals that now served as community centers, the courts, the scribbled notes of anonymous complaints, the requests for clothes, the memoranda sent back and forth like blood running beneath the skin, reports from employers, NYSES, the VA, the Railroad Retirement Board, the Social Security Administration, the warp and the woof, the weavers busy making a coat of one color for the child in the manger. The child only asks that you don't frighten him. Nothing else. For everything else he can do.

I like filing the papers. It is like secreting bits of paper

into tin cans to be buried in the Dead Sea caves. Perhaps one letter from Pilgrim State Hospital might provide a future researcher with a dazzling interpretation of the twentieth century. History is our greatest art. The historian makes us unafraid. Now you see why I like to file papers. I can go off into extravagant fancies like a child following a piece of string to Babylon and suddenly coming face to face with the open claws of the cowardly lion.

I looked around at the great soft wooden floor with the globs of white lights. The workers sat bunched into twenty islands of eight desks. Each cluster of eight desks represented a unit. And each unit represented about fifteen hundred people. The lives of twenty-five thousand people lay in the filing cabinets. I had the file open on the 1,600,000 drawer. The numbers began with one and went upward like the twentieth century into the 19's. The older numbers reached back into the WPA and a vocabulary unknown to most of the people receiving assistance, or even to those who gave it. I picked up a letter from Central Islip State Hospital to file on Miss Claxton. Miss Claxton was discharged from Central Islip on convalescent care, which meant she was free of the hospital and she could be as free as her few ounces of brain matter permitted her to be. She came out of the hospital with a skirt, a blouse, a coat, one pair of shoes, one pair of stockings, one pair of panties, one brassiere, two blouses, and one handkerchief. I went to see her room on West 97th Street. Her room lay down the end of a tunnel of niches Caligari would hesitate to enter. Miss Claxton's room was seven feet higher than a casket. The room was completely bare when I walked in. And Miss Claxton looked as barren as the room. She opened her closet door and the one blouse hung

on a hook. She asked me if she could have a radio. Miss Claxton asked me if I could send her money for a coffee-pot. I sat down and sent her enough money to join the human race. The letters from the hospitals were all marked privileged and confidential. And every bus in New York City carried a sign telling the riders that 16,000,000 Americans were suffering from severe tensions. One out of ten. Schizophrenia was the word most often turned up in the mail folders. And what it meant I didn't know, although I could see it on the faces of the people so labeled, they were cut apart, separated, they didn't blend into the landscape that we find around ourselves. The landscape that seems to grow directly out of the earth, even the curious stainless steel can openers in Macy's basement.

I put away the letter on Miss Claxton stamped privileged and confidential. I wondered if they ever told Miss Claxton that she was schizophrenic, chronic, as people are told they have a bleeding ulcer. An illness has to be understood. It is then that we come into possession of our bodies. Miss Claxton came out of Central Islip to find work. But she couldn't even find her way to the IRT subway station. She sat in her room and played the radio she bought with the money I had sent her for galoshes. The manual makes no provision for a radio. The manual also makes no provision for entertainment. Only the aged and disabled received \$1.15 additional semimonthly to purchase magazines, to make a telephone call to a relative who may or may not answer the phone, to ride the bus to a center for golden age citizens. I asked Miss Claxton what kind of work she wanted to do. Any work she told me that will give me a place to go to. Miss Claxton didn't come into possession of her body. She didn't even know she had a body. She had

become separated. I was the only person she spoke to in New York City.

I filed more papers standing in the scooped-out earth. I held a dozen skulls in my hand. I emptied the folder and sat down at my desk to wait for Figueroa to telephone. Figueroa said he would telephone at 10:00. It was 10:30. The only phone call I had received was from Mrs. Washington who frantically told me she had lost \$18 in the ladies' room of the cafeteria on 96th Street and Broadway.

"This is a bitch," Bronson told me, and he put an open case record on my desk. "Read this entry."

I read the entry. It said Miss Scott had had four children by her brother Ralph and one child by her father, Jimie Watson, and she didn't want any of it documented because her brother Ralph would kill her if anybody tried to prove him the father.

"What would you do?" Bronson asked me.

"I'd tell the girl to invent a father. Let her get an old obituary notice from a Jersey newspaper. Why isn't the brother supporting the kids now?"

"She said he took off for Canada."

"And the father?"

"He died two weeks ago in Rockland State Hospital."

"Did you talk to this girl yet?"

"No, I just got the case."

"And you'll have it for a long time. When you talk to her, you'll know what to do."

"I know what to do with everything but those god-damn payments on my house. One day I'm going to sit down and dictate my own case. And I'll be my own investigator. I'll peep behind the curtain. I'll lift up the rug a little. I'd like to see myself the way somebody made the mold.

And being colored doesn't help a Negro." Bronson laughed wildly at his joke. He blew his nose and pounded on his desk.

"If I didn't laugh once in awhile, I think I would sink like my mortgage."

I didn't wait any longer for Figueroa to telephone. I dialed the Chester and Mrs. Colon answered the hall phone. She told me Figueroa wasn't in his room. I started to dial Zeussa at the desk phone when the phone rang.

The call was for Jackson.

I went to a phone in Unit B and dialed Zeussa.

I asked Zeussa if he had seen Figueroa.

"Your boy friend checked out 8 A.M. this morning. I gave him back one week's rent just to be rid of him."

"Did he say where he was moving to?"

"He didn't say a word. I was happy to see him go. The bastard had a statutory rape case in his room. That's all I need, with everything else. Then I'll get all the nuts."

"If he comes back for mail or a check, let me know if he leaves his new address."

"I'll ask him. But he looked like he was going packing."

I immediately went to the file cabinet and got a form M 274. The form was a post-office clearance and it would give me Figueroa's new mailing address, if he left a forwarding address.

I dialed Miss Fletcher and she told me first. Her voice wasn't frantic, but she guessed or knew Figueroa was gone.

"He moved out this morning," Miss Fletcher said. "I was just going to call you. Do you know anything about where he moved?"

"Zeussa said he didn't leave a forwarding address."

"But he'll have to see you, won't he, if he still wants his check?"

"If he wants to show up or if he really needs the check."

"Can you come out to see me?" Miss Fletcher asked. The human voice is an extraordinary instrument. A hesitation, a rush forward of words, a dam and then a bridge, a scaling of a height, and then a breakthrough, and then a question turned inward, all this and more, any person can say in a single sentence. Miss Fletcher told me, without telling me, that she wanted to tell me what she hadn't yet told me about Figueroa. All this she said without saying it. Only by the sound of her words. No wonder we respond to music without knowing how to read a single note. To blow on a trumpet. And no wonder the jazz musician considers himself a giant when he stands up to play his instrument in a session where the notes aren't written down and he blows out what he could never say in words. He is dipping down into the inchoate.

"Can you come?" Miss Fletcher asked again, when I didn't immediately reply.

I told Miss Fletcher I would be out to see her and when I went back to my desk I saw a note telling me that Mr. Ross had arrived in Service.

Mr. Ross was sitting alone, against the wall, he looked fifty and he looked frightened. He held a 9 x 12 manila envelope. He wore a dark navy blue suit and his green necktie was pulled tight against his throat. His face was flushed. His white shirt was surprisingly clean.

"I don't have any money" was the first thing Mr. Ross said to me. "I just spent my last fifteen cents to come here."

Mr. Ross had just been discharged from Pilgrim State Hospital after spending nine years swallowing pills and

trying to rip the fish net off his head. The hospital discharged him like Miss Claxton, on convalescent care to himself, since he had no one else in the world to care for him. He was sent directly to a room on West 102nd Street. Mr. Ross was given enough food money to last him until breakfast of the morning he came to see me.

"My rent is also due," Mr. Ross told me.

"I'll have your rent money and food money in a few minutes," I told Mr. Ross. I had already prepared his cash for him. "Are you still living on West 102nd Street?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to stay there?"

"I don't know where else to move."

"Why don't you check the ads in the *Times* and try to move into a private apartment. There're a lot of people now on the Drive who have empty rooms. You can get a nice room facing the river for the rent you're paying on West 102nd Street."

"A nice room," Mr. Ross said. "I thought I had to go where you sent me."

"This is your money that you're spending. You spend it on what's good for you."

"My money?" How? his face asked. The question relaxed his face. He let go of the manila envelope. He let his eyes begin to turn the beams of light into objects. "It's a strange thing to say," he told me, "that this is my money. I have no money."

"It's your money because the Federal law states that it's your money."

"Then I can move out of that house with my money?"

"You can."

"Did you ever go into that house?" Mr. Ross asked me.

"Several times."

"Did you ever sleep in that house?"

"No."

"And you never ate in that house?"

"No." I wanted to know what Mr. Ross saw in the house on West 102nd Street. If I had two arms that could topple pillars, I would have pushed the house down and planted geraniums on the land. I would have let a dozen seasons go by to cleanse the land before erecting another roof.

"I don't think you would want to sleep or eat in the house. I don't think I want to stay there any more to eat and sleep. I only stayed there because I thought I had to. I am so used to doing what I think I have to do. Do you think I can find a job?"

"What do you want to do?"

"To work."

"What kind of work?"

"I used to run an elevator. But now I've had no experience for nine years. But they told me at the hospital that the new elevators run by themselves. You just have to stand and smile at the people and look serious, so that they don't realize they are dropping twenty stories to the ground."

Mr. Ross made the elevator drop in his cold, effortless, loose voice.

"Why don't you become a messenger?" I couldn't see Mr. Ross holding the starting brake on an elevator car poised twenty stories above a shaft.

"What's that?"

"The banks have messengers. The insurance companies. They're about the best jobs in New York if you like to get around. And it's a responsible job. They trust you with

all kinds of important papers. You ride the subways, buses, and taxis. The pay is good. And all these big companies have wonderful benefits. They need men who want to do a good necessary job."

"Do you think I could get such a job?"

"You could try."

"But how will I explain my nine years?"

"Tell them you were in Europe looking after a sick brother."

"You think I can work and I don't have to sleep and eat in that house?"

"Yes," I told Mr. Ross.

He started to cry. He held onto the desk, supporting his chest, and he wept. He didn't try to wipe the tears, but let them flow, as though they were washing away a grime on his face. He didn't weep aloud. Just the tears. It wasn't weeping. It was a cleansing. I know I never feel so clean as when I have wept.

I got Mr. Ross his money and then I walked through Harlem to Central Park West.

Harlem is ugly wherever you turn, except for an accidental block that hasn't been overrun by buildings chopped up into cubicles. But the blocks below 125th Street, the blocks bordering on the great white world, the blocks in the valley of Morningside Heights, in the shadow of St. John the Divine, in full sight of anyone who has two open eyes, they are ugly without pause. I passed Mrs. Carter's house. She lived on West 118th Street. She had two rooms with one small window that opened on a brick wall. Her door was a sheet of tin. She had tin cans nailed against the floor board to keep out the rats. She had steel wool stuffed into all the cracks. She told me she once woke

up at night and felt a rat licking her throat and she screamed loud enough to disturb God, but not her landlord.

I crossed 110th Street and looked, as I always did, in amazement at Central Park.

The green benches on 110th Street were occupied by the wine drinkers. They grasped bottles of wine hidden in brown paper grocery bags. They sat, sprawled out, like scarecrows who've just been told they have life. The men curiously looked at one another. They doubted the existence of one another. Only a fist fight, a broken nose, blood gushing out of an eye, a head knocked to the cobbled pavement reassured them that they had once had a childhood.

The sun was hot. The wine joined the blood. The men sat facing 110th Street, the buildings from Eighth Avenue to Fifth Avenue, the buildings that faced the extraordinary sight of Central Park embraced by Fifth Avenue and Central Park West. But the buildings on West 110th Street had no view. I had been into the buildings. Families didn't have the apartments. Roomers roomed in the rooms, and the only view they ever saw was the air shaft from the community kitchen. I couldn't understand why a great sheath of windowed buildings didn't rise on 110th Street. But I could only tell myself that Harlem refused to draw the boundaries. A luxury apartment building in Harlem always seemed to me to be the final surrender.

I walked on the park side of Central Park West, looking across the street at Miss Fletcher's building.

"Hello," I heard.

I turned to see Mr. Winna seated on a bench, facing his building. He had an aluminum reflector held up against

his neck, so that his face would catch the concentrated sun.

"You look at my building like an appraiser." Mr. Winna removed the reflector from his neck. The wet clay coloring of his face was a mottled red.

"I need the sun more than the sun needs me." Mr. Winna pointed to his reflector gadget. "This makes up for the time spent under electric bulbs."

Mr. Winna wiped his red wet face.

"I was just thinking of the sun. It has to travel ninety-three million miles to get to my face. It makes you realize that our world is no bigger than a dollar bill. And most of us think we need ninety-three million dollar bills to get to the sun."

Mr. Winna took an apple out of his pocket. He bit into the apple. The skin of the apple snapped. Mr. Winna ground the white of the apple and spit out the skin.

"I would like to sit here," Mr. Winna said, "and see all of my tenants at their windows with Glass Wax washing their windows. But they're too busy. Do you know, Miss Fletcher is the only tenant I've ever had who washed her windows when she moved in."

A Puerto Rican girl passed the bench. She wore a loose cotton wrap-around skirt that showed her thighs. She smiled at Mr. Winna. He nodded to her. The girl looked into the approaching cars, and when a car slowed down, she slowed down, and rubbed her thighs together.

"She's crazy," Mr. Winna told me. "The only car that will stop for her will be a patrol car. But she has a boy friend on dope. He sends her out. He also comes and takes her check on the third and eighteenth. She's in 3 DE."

"How many babies does she have?" I asked Mr. Winna.

"Two and one-third. She's in her third month."

"You know your tenants," I told Mr. Winna.

"When you live on top of a beehive you have to know your bees. What do you think would happen if they all came streaming out of their rooms at once? All the mothers with their babies and their boy friends on dope, all of them in a big parade up Fifth Avenue, with the mayor watching, the governor, and all the ladies that pose for charity balls in the newspapers?"

Mr. Winna was right. A prowler car did swoop down on the girl. It came out of the side street like a hawk. The girl protested for an instant. And then she got into the prowler car.

"They won't arrest her," Mr. Winna told me. "The judges demand proof. They'll search her for dope." He threw the core of his apple into the street. "And now I can keep the doctor away for another day. In my old age now I'm in a race between living and dying. The longer I live, the less time I figure I have to die. I need this park bench. I need the perspective from my cubbyhole in the building. Do you know, sometimes I feel everybody in this city is taking narcotics and living in rooms eight by ten feet."

Mr. Winna held his aluminum reflector so that it caught the sun.

"I heard some people cook eggs by the heat of the sun. What do you think is out there for us?" Mr. Winna pointed to the sky. "Is this the way we're supposed to live? That girl getting into a police car. The police hiding around the corner. Myself sitting with the reflector around my neck. Do you know if I put salt on my food I would be dead in

three months? Who are those people living in my house? What do they mean? Where did they come from? What do they want? I know what I want. I want to see all of the lights shining in paradise. I want to see from one end of the world to the next. I never thought about such things until I took the lease on this house. Now that's all I think about. These people make you see what you only see when you close your eyes for sleep."

Mr. Winna laughed.

"And if you keep your eyes open! I don't like to talk about my tenants for the reason I gave you. But Miss Fletcher makes me uneasy. This washing the windows. I can't see her sitting on that toilet on the fifth floor. She takes her baby down in the elevator dressed like Scarsdale. She has a man named Figueroa in her room. I don't know where the baby sleeps, but he sleeps with her. Two neighbors and the super told me. These tenants like to talk. You can't trust them with daylight. I don't like tenants like Miss Fletcher. She doesn't fit. That means trouble. And trouble means the building inspectors with fifty-dollar bills."

Mr. Winna turned from the sun and gave me a smile that I could no more interpret than the Koran. And then he explained his smile.

"Don't you think, Mr. Phillips, that it's funny, that I'm going to ask Miss Fletcher to move because she washed her windows?"

I looked at the sky. I looked at the sun. I looked at Central Park West that stretched south like the great wall of China. I looked at Mr. Winna's building that stuck up out of the holy earth like a disemboweled pig. I looked at Mr. Winna who looked like he was sitting in a steam bath.

His flesh hung in folds as he laughed. He laughed until he started to choke. The gagging frightened him. The blood rushed to reassure his fright.

“I can’t eat salt,” he told me. “I can’t laugh.”

Mr. Winna picked up his reflector and crossed the avenue against the light to go sit in his cubicle. I sat down on the bench to wait for Miss Fletcher to come downstairs. I had asked her on the phone to meet me across the avenue from her building. I didn’t want to ride Mr. Winna’s elevator. I didn’t want to climb the four flights. I didn’t want to run into the man in the heavy black suit going through the garbage bags again. I didn’t want to see Mr. Winna in his cubicle. I just wanted to see Miss Fletcher without the smell of Figueroa in the room.

13

I saw Miss Fletcher hurry out of Winna's building and suddenly stop and stare at Central Park. She looked back into the dark entrance and again at the Park and the hot gray sky. She saw me sitting on the bench across the avenue. She hurried across the avenue. She carried her baby and a gray plastic shoulder bag. She sat down on the bench but she felt the Park at her back. The buildings on Central Park West looked molten in the wet heat.

"Can we go into the Park?" she asked, as though it might be an extraordinary request.

We walked away from Central Park West, the simmering buildings, and into the Park, up an incline. Miss Fletcher opened the plastic shoulder bag and took out a receiving blanket that she spread out for the baby.

Miss Fletcher felt the grass. Probably the first grass she had touched in months. She dug her fingernails into the earth to get at the dampness and then she doubled the receiving blanket and spread a diaper on top of the blan-

ket. She put the baby on top of the diaper. A low thick branch shielded the baby from the sun. The baby lay on its back, its hands clenched.

"Coo," Miss Fletcher said. She rubbed her finger along the baby's arm. The baby stirred. "Sleep," Miss Fletcher said. And then she told me, "She listens to me now. She really knows my voice, and so quick. I thought it took months and months. I thought she would just go on sleeping. But she knows me now. And all so soon. What do they learn after months and months and years?" She didn't expect an answer. She took a plastic milk bottle out of her shoulder bag and tested the nipple.

"I'm worried about giving her my breasts now. Can she get TB from me, if I slept with Figueroa or if he had it? I thought about it the last time he stayed with me. He started to cough during the night. He woke up Ellen. She became frightened and started to cry. And then I couldn't go back to sleep thinking that she was afraid. She's not putting on weight the way she should."

Miss Fletcher saw my eyes go toward her breasts and for an instant I thought she was going to open her blouse and put my hand on her breasts so that I could feel for their fullness. Her breasts didn't look as full as when she had opened her blouse in Figueroa's room. The roundness had gone. The heaviness, the look of a swollen stream. But she straightened her shoulders and I saw the fullness was only lost in the yellow cotton blouse.

"Does Figueroa have TB?" she asked.

"I don't know. It can start up again at any time. The clinic said he was all right but that was on a visit made weeks ago."

"He coughed when he was in my room. He just lay on his back and his body was all wet."

"The clinic will know."

"He doesn't go to the clinic. He hasn't been to the clinic in months. He's afraid to have anyone look inside of him. The X-ray machine makes him sweat. He said that a doctor's white coat turns him into mush. He told me all this. He likes to talk that way about himself when I rub his back with alcohol."

"When do you rub his back with alcohol?"

"After we have sex."

Miss Fletcher swayed on the grass. She crossed her legs tightly. She held her hands across her breasts. She bit on her lip so that her full red mouth became narrow, thin, almost white. Her eyes went to Figueroa naked above her, coming down on top of her. And then her eyes went to the baby on the receiving blanket. And she looked at the trees surrounding us as though we had fled New York on the tail of a white horse.

"I told you I would tell you about him. He gets tired after sex. He only likes it when it's all over. That's when he asks me to rub his back. He's like a baby then. He loves the alcohol on him. And after I've rubbed his back, he goes to sleep. And if he doesn't go to sleep, then he likes to lie stretched out in bed without talking. He's always in bed. He likes to be in his pajamas and he likes to be in bed. The only other thing he likes are clothes, especially neckties and sport jackets. He buys his jackets on Third Avenue. He likes to tell people that he got them from a friend going to jail or someone paid him off a debt. He just got a new cotton suit at Gimbels and he'll be

telling people that a friend gave it to him. I don't know what makes him do it. Except that he thinks he has something coming from the world. He got the suit with part of the money you sent me. I gave him back \$20. I know you told me not to give him any of the money, but he showed me the ad in the paper about the suit and he did give me the \$20. You can guess how he is in sex. He doesn't give anything. He waits for it to be over. And then he has to be treated as though he's done something special. But he did do something special with Ellen. He made her. But how and why, I can't understand."

"You see a thousand babies in that building over there." I pointed toward Winna's building, momentarily hidden by trees.

"I do. And that's even harder. I talked to one girl on my floor. She just came out of Bedford Prison. She looked at the babies crawling on the hall floors. She said, 'They're going to live until they die, honey.' And then she told me, 'Which they do, honey.' She picked up Ellen and held her in her arms for a minute. And then she started to swing Ellen. And then she told me, 'If she was mine, honey, I'd swing her right against the wall and knock all of her brains out on this nice clean wall.' I grabbed Ellen away from her and she laughed. 'Don't worry, honey,' she told me, 'I won't swing her sweet soft head against the wall, it's happening without me.' The girl came into my room later for coffee. She looked more quiet. She told me she just had a fix. And then she told me she had three babies. She sold the first baby to the father for \$500 and she spent the \$500 in ten days. The second baby she left in Richmond. The third baby she sold in Detroit. She showed me that she's four months pregnant now. She told me that the father is

a cab driver who got into the back of the cab with her for five dollars, and she can't remember his name or the number of his cab. She just happened to need the five dollars."

Miss Fletcher stopped a caterpillar crawling toward the baby. A robin tugged at a fat worm. Five boys in leather zippered jackets came up the incline and when they saw me they looked as though they had found their quarry. They halted and I expected them to unsheath their knives. But the leader saw the baby on the receiving blanket and they went on into the denser parts of the forest.

Miss Fletcher looked at the yellowed caterpillar. The dozen furred legs hurried into the brush.

"The ground swarms when you look at it. In Cleveland my aunt's family used to take me fishing at Lake Erie. We'd dig at night in the lawn for worms and put them into tin cans. The worms looked frantic when we disturbed them. My aunt told me that tens of thousands of worms lived in the lawn and they chewed up the earth. They kept the earth fresh. That was their job. She said everybody had a job in nature. There wasn't a thing alive that just was. Nothing she said, except people, they just don't know what to do with themselves. My aunt told me about the women she worked for in Cleveland who lived in Shaker Heights. She said they just got on the telephone and wouldn't get off. They talked the day away. My aunt said they didn't stop, the words kept pouring out like water into a broken pot. It's a lament, my aunt told me. All the time they talk they're praying that just one thing they say will be listened to, one word heard, the way Ellen hears when I say coo. I waited for one word like that from Figueroa. I didn't even get it when I rubbed his back

with alcohol. But the word has to be in him if he made something like Ellen."

"What do you think Figueroa could do?"

"He could do what other men do."

"Like what?"

"Take Ellen into the Park."

Miss Fletcher brushed her arm against her breast. Her breasts pushed against her blouse. Her hand picked up a branch that she dug into the grass. She made a circle with the branch. She dug the branch into the grass until it stood upright.

The trees stood bold and upright. The rocks forced their way up past the grass. Great chunks of rock lunged and then stopped abruptly. I could hear the rumble of the 8th Avenue subway. The Park wasn't wide enough to escape the paved avenues. It was only the width of half a mile. You could still breathe the air from Central Park West. The buses poured out black fumes. The sun beat down on the long lines of parked cars. Miss Fletcher looked as though she would have liked the Park to bury her, almost like a man. But a man that filled her, like the thick branch filled her hand.

"I was thinking," Miss Fletcher said, "of what happened to me after Figueroa. My body got larger. My thighs were tremendous. I had to buy special maternity clothes. My stomach was enormous. I carried low and big. My teeth began to hurt. My breasts swelled up. I began hearing a second heart beat. I began to feel in me the kicking and turnings of a person, the kicking and turnings when you can't sleep and you wonder what the morning will look like. I couldn't keep my food down. Those were just the physical things. And what I thought about I couldn't re-

peat, it would be like trying to find yourself before you were born. What happened to Figueroa? Did anything? You ought to know, does a man go through any kind of changes? I mean if he knows he's going to be a father. If he can almost remember the night the baby caught hold. If he's with the woman all the time she's changing and swelling like dough in an oven. If he even has sex while the baby is in almost watching and feeling him too."

The thick branch tottered and fell.

The baby cried for its milk. Its cry sent the sparrows flocking from the branches.

Miss Fletcher started to unbutton her blouse, but then she saw the plastic bottle on the receiving blanket. She picked up the plastic bottle, tested the nipple, and when the milk didn't immediately spurt out, she put the bottle aside. She unbuttoned her blouse and brought the baby to her breast. The baby seized the taut brown expectant nipple.

"Look at her," Miss Fletcher told me. "When she cries for her milk, my body knows it beforehand. My breasts are filling up and swelling. That's what I mean about her and Figueroa. Could anything like that happen to him now? Does anything like that happen to a man?"

Miss Fletcher made no attempt to cover her breast and I made no attempt to obscure the male animal. I let him run loose on the rumped grass.

"One of the kings of England had two thousand children. There's an Arab king today who has six hundred children. I just got a letter from Sing Sing. I wrote to get some paternity papers signed by a man who is doing ten years. I got a letter back that five different agencies in New York had written making inquiries about him. He had

fifteen children from eight different women and then he volunteered the information that he had about twenty more children scattered between New York and Oregon. Some men look after their children like a lion going out on a hunt to bring back food. Some men chew up their kids for breakfast. The male stickleback looks after the eggs in the nest like a mother. The male lumpfish practically hatches the eggs. Some men diaper their babies, make formula, get up at night, walk the babies, and most men just turn on their backs. Wherever you turn, there's always a surprise. That's why you can't talk about Figueroa and what he ought to be doing. He has to do it or you have to make him do it and when it's done, you know it."

The sky flattened out. The sun looked like a child's dab of yellow paint. The trees stuck up like wavy black lines. The grass threatened to open up into a hole vaster than anything Alice dropped into. The earth became still like a November day before a burst of dark rain. A mounted policeman stopped at the thicket and looked at us on the grass as though he had stumbled on King Kong.

I looked up and saw soot begin to pour from the roofs on Mr. Winna's corner. Thick black soot that couldn't rise in the heavy heat. No wind stirred to scatter the soot on the pedestrians. The soot hung above the buildings in the hot gray sky. The soot is the ugliest sight in New York. The sky looks snatched from the viewer. As though your eyes have been ripped out of your head. To whom can you protest and who will replace your eyes? You wait for the soot to get swallowed up into the sky. For the sky to be clean. So that the eye can try again to look for boundaries. The soot began to move toward where we were sitting. I made a move to get up. Miss Fletcher took the baby from

her breast. Soot had fallen on the baby that rubbed black. My eyes smarted. Miss Fletcher gathered up her receiving blanket and we walked further into the Park.

"How does the Park stay so green?" Miss Fletcher asked.

The Park was green. The trees were thick with leaves. The grass leaped toward the brush. The Park didn't look manicured. The Park might be the real country. A real forest. What people see in the suburbs out of picture windows. But the sounds weren't the growth of trees. When a bluejay sang you immediately thought of a tape recorder.

"Why didn't I walk in the Park before?" Miss Fletcher asked. "Do you know, I always looked at the Park as a place where other people walked. Do you know where Figueroa liked to walk? On Madison Avenue. Not Madison Avenue up in East Harlem. But Madison Avenue where those expensive shops begin. He loved to look at the expensive clothes. The neckties that nobody else seemed to wear except the men who wore them. He liked to look at everything that wasn't his. That's why I thought he would start looking at the baby. My aunt called a baby glory. They come straight out of God, my aunt would say, but you've got to spend a lifetime proving it to them."

We were approaching East 102nd Street, the East Side of the Park, and East 102nd Street led into East Harlem. Miss Fletcher didn't want to be led into East Harlem. She stopped on the walk like a wren. She looked toward the crosstown streets that emptied into the black tunnels of the New York Central Railroad trestle. The only city blocks in New York that look medieval. Her mother's house was only four blocks away. The Children's Center lay near the exit on East 104th Street, a big building where children were kept when there was no longer any-

one to keep them. The beds in the building were all filled and the main lobby had cots set up one against the other, as though an emergency had flung the children out of their homes during the night.

Without saying a word about East Harlem or her mother's house, Miss Fletcher turned and we went back into the Park, toward the West Side exit. We passed a father hovering over his daughter's stroller like a *maitre de*. A street gang pushed past us. I counted eleven boys. They walked in the Park like an army of red ants. If they could, they would have laid the Park bare. They slashed at the leaves of the trees and kicked up the grass. You could hear their dull anger booming ahead of them as they walked on the only earth between the East River and the Drive.

The Park had depth north and south. But east and west, the Park was sixteen times the length of the stage at the Radio City Music Hall. We were nearing the West Side exit. The temporary green of the Park gave way to the heat from Central Park West. The buses clogged the air. The soot still hung, like bats in a damp cave. The buildings loomed as though they were going to swell and burst.

Mr. Winna's building burst on Miss Fletcher. Soot still poured from the roof. None of the windows in the building were open. The lobby looked like a dark pit. Even across the avenue, into the Park, you thought you could smell the urine, the urine that lay on the elevator floor, in the halls, the stopped-up toilets, the stairway, the bags of garbage daily culled by the screeching chalk-white man with bulging pockets.

Miss Fletcher sat down, flatly, on the bench where Mr.

Winna had held the aluminum reflector up against his neck.

"Why didn't you move out?" I asked.

"I thought Figueroa might show up today."

"But he didn't. Have you been looking for a place?"

"I looked yesterday. But the buildings all look even worse than this one. At least the Park is here. Now that I've walked into it, I know it's here."

"Where did you look?"

"I went into some buildings on Riverside Drive and some of the buildings between Broadway and the Drive. I look for the quiet buildings. But the quiet buildings are all taken."

"Try 85th Street. Or 88th Street. They tried to plant some trees on 88th Street."

"But you don't know, just by looking. Some of the imposing buildings are the worst. I went into one on Riverside Drive. I saw addicts coming in and out of the lobby. I know them already with their eyes that look like squashed tomatoes. That walk that doesn't take them anywhere. Even worse than this building. Look!"

A girl crossing the avenue waved to Miss Fletcher. The girl wore green shorts. Her legs were thin. Her breasts were covered by a purple ribbed top. She looked unsteady on her feet. "She's the one who sold her baby for \$500," Miss Fletcher told me.

I looked at the girl who sold her baby. She came up to the bench. Her eyes seemed to be looking around for a hole in the ground to swallow her up.

"Hello, honey," she greeted Miss Fletcher. "Is this your investigator?" she acknowledged me. "It's hot," she said,

"hot. I'm going into the Park to make it. Do they let you go into the Park if you're getting it?" she asked me.

Her stomach was puffed out into a hard tight ball where she carried the beginning of her fourth child.

"This makes me a woman," she told me, pointing to the hard ball. "As long as you've got this, you're in. Do they let you into Mt. Sinai if you're wearing shorts? My investigator told me to get a paper signed at Mt. Sinai so that I can get another \$2.60 on my check."

She sat down on the bench. "I'll make it another day to Mt. Sinai. It'll still be standing. I know how officials are. They get nervous when you fool around with their apple cart. They like everything to be smooth, so that one day goes into the next. They're busy. Jesus, I hate busy people. They're pathetic bastards. They think they've got it made when only the bluebird has it made."

A sudden burst of soot poured out of Winna's building. The soot choked the air.

"Why don't they cut his balls off for doing that!"

The girl pointed to Miss Fletcher's baby. The baby slept, rocked by the walk on the grass.

"Cover up her face!" she told Miss Fletcher. "You can't make it with a baby! They've already chosen up sides. You're not in, honey! This is where they put you. Bedford was like a girl's camp compared to this place. I'm going into the Park! I'd like to do it with one of those horses the cops ride. That might make me feel like a woman again!"

She was gone. Into the Park. She looked thin enough for a flock of sparrows to carry her to rest.

"I'm going to move!" Miss Fletcher said. "In the

morning I'll move. Figueroa can find me if he comes looking."

"Go to this house." I gave her the 87th Street address.

"What about Figueroa? Will you close his case?"

"If he doesn't call me tomorrow. Does he have any kind of money to live on?"

"Not that I know of."

"He didn't work bartending on 110th Street?"

"He just went there to sit, he knew the people who ran the bar."

"Maybe he'll call me, then, in the morning."

"You know why I called you, don't you," Miss Fletcher said, or asked—her voice was hesitant to declare itself. She looked toward the trees inside the Park that grew without guy wires supporting them.

"Why?" I asked. "Not to tell me that you rubbed Figueroa's back with alcohol?"

"That?" Her breasts almost pushed out of the yellow cotton blouse. The top two buttons were open. I could see the round brown top. The beginning of the swelling that a man naturally reached for, that comes to a nipple he sucks. That he bites. That he has taken from him when he's old enough to walk. That he reaches for again when he's old enough to remember.

"That," she said, "not that. I just said that about Figueroa because I thought you might be able to see more of him then. I got frightened this morning. So frightened I was cold and wet in my room. I felt like I was choking up. I couldn't hold myself together. I felt I had to break up into a hundred tiny pieces. That's when I called you. I was worried about Figueroa. I was worried that maybe

I was making a mistake about him. That what I wanted him to do or be didn't make sense. That I would be left alone then. I was just frightened. Tell me, does it make sense that I want Figueroa to be a father?"

I could no more answer now than the sun could decide to rest for an hour. Figueroa had only done what any stray dog or housefly could do.

I told Miss Fletcher the first thing was for her to move out of Winna's building. I told her I would look for Figueroa. I put my black notebook under my arm. Miss Fletcher crossed Central Park West and walked into Winna's building.

The girl in the green shorts came out of the Park. She watched Miss Fletcher enter Winna's building. She came over to me.

"The Park's no place for me! The flies bite and the stones get in my shoes. And that house is no place for her. The worms will begin to crawl into her soon. Did you ever see them pull worms out? Did you ever see them put worms in?"

She looked at my black notebook.

"You have," she said, "you're hip." She squeezed her limp arm above the elbow and caught the blue vein between her fingers. "Don't let her get to this one, honey." She stroked the vein. A bee buzzed in front of her, the bee hung buzzing. "Buzz, buzz," she told the bee, "that's all there is to it, just one sting. Here, honey," and she offered the bee her vein. The bee refused the nectar.

14

I had to leave Figueroa piled up on my desk and hurry to see Mrs. Reade.

Mrs. Reade told me I had to see her. In her Southern voice, flaked, aged, almost born when Lincoln spoke, she told me, "They're trying to bury me when I can still get up. They're putting me out. I don't want to go, Mr. Phillips. I just want to keep my room and put everything into as much order as I can." When the aged call, you go. The aged are not to be disregarded. They live where most of us are terrified to visit. But who would stop short of the visit?

I had a referral on my desk telling me that Mrs. Reade belonged in a nursing home. Her weight was down to ninety-two pounds. Her eyes could only see what she had seen when she was three months old. She couldn't go to the corner of Broadway to buy her barbecued chicken for \$1.19 that would last four dinners. She didn't have the strength in her hands to press the elevator button, to hold back the scissoring doors, to pull open the great antique

wrought-iron lobby door on Broadway. She couldn't walk to the Park on 106th Street and Broadway, now emptied of neighbors. She couldn't walk to her church. She told me she never joined the Riverside Church but she walked there in the afternoon, to sit and look at the stained glass, listen to the bells tolling twenty stories above the Drive, the bells make you want to fly into the hands of God, she told me, but He'll wait, He knows we're coming, but what He wants with all of us I don't know.

I had a memo on my desk from St. Luke's Hospital telling me that Mrs. Reade flatly refused to go into a nursing home. I had a memo from a panel doctor telling me he recommended Mrs. Reade for a nursing home but she told him that she preferred to remain in her room. I had a long telephone conversation with a minister who attended to Mrs. Reade. He told me he tried to talk Mrs. Reade into going into a nursing home, and she told him a nursing home was death and not a quiet death, but it was like being squashed between two pieces of pine board.

I rode the IRT subway to 96th Street listening to the worker from St. Luke's tell me on the telephone, "Those homes are medieval. They're rotten. Physically rotten. I don't know how they stay in business. They put a woman who wants a little sun into a room where you can't even hang up a coat and with a window that is a brick wall. They force her to put all of her possessions in a single suitcase. They feed her a gruel that would turn the stomach of a pig. I don't blame Mrs. Reade. But where else can she go? But please, please, keep her out of the Berkshire. I wouldn't want to feel I had a hand in sentencing anyone to that place. I had one poor old woman go into the Berk-

shire. She called me up one day and told me, 'If you have a mother alive, please get me out of this place!' She took it so bad that she turned her face to the wall and shoved cotton balls down her throat until she died. That almost sent me back to Hartford. And I don't know why it didn't."

The subway stalled for an instant at 116th Street. I looked up to see a man caught in the subway doors. He was trying to force the doors away from his head. A boy leaped up, caught the arm of the man, and pulled him into the subway car. The subway rushed forward toward 110th Street. The man pressed his hands against his head that had almost been crushed. The man looked seventy. His hair was white. His face looked as though the train was carrying him deeper into the earth. Mrs. Reade had told me of her last ride on a subway train. She was seventy-six, on her way to 59th Street. She was trying to board the train at 96th Street. "A wave of people caught me. They flung me against the tiled walls. I tried to press myself up against the wall but they wouldn't let me do even that. They were determined to knock me down. They kept shoving me. One man gave me a look of absolute disgust as though I was some mud against his shoe. I think he could have easily crushed my neck and gone home to eat his supper." I looked at the seventy-year-old man. I saw him take out a yellow card from his pocket. I recognized the card. It was a welfare identification card with his name, address, case number, and the name of the person who issued the card. Above his head a finance company offered \$500 on a phone call. Mrs. Reade was getting \$42 semi-monthly. A nursing home would cost her approximately \$104 semimonthly. And if she was stretched out on a city

hospital bed, she would cost \$400 semimonthly or \$800 a month.

The train lurched under the first nursing home I had seen. Mrs. Waller had a bed. The first time I went to see her she turned her back on me and cried against the wall. Mrs. Waller had lived in Zeussa's building. She had a cat that she loved. Zeussa told me that the day she went to the nursing home the cat jumped out of the window. Mrs. Waller was deaf, she was eighty pounds overweight, her heart couldn't push the blood through her arteries, and she had lain three days in her room with her cat on top of her before she was missed and Zeussa entered her room. Zeussa told me that the cat was ready to leap at his throat. Zeussa telephoned me and I sent out a doctor and the doctor said she could no longer hold onto her body. Mrs. Waller wouldn't talk to me at the home. She only cried. Mrs. Waller was in a room with sixteen women. They all wore white nightgowns and they had all taken the past out of their eyes. Mrs. Waller died in eight weeks.

I got out at 96th Street and Broadway and walked to Mrs. Reade's building. I pushed open the great wrought-iron door and pressed the elevator for the sixth floor. Mrs. Reade lived in one of the remaining private apartment buildings on Broadway. A building built like a fort. Huge chunks of stone. High ceilings. Marble-lined halls. The elevator looked like a cathedral. The apartments had six, seven, eight rooms. Great rooms, like extinct herds of buffalo.

Mrs. Simmons answered the door, opening the door on the iron chain.

"Mr. Phillips, excuse me!" She quickly took off the chain.

I went into the foyer, a tremendous room, lit by a Tiffany shade.

The foyer led into a kitchen, a pantry, a storeroom, a maid's room, and seven sleeping rooms. Mrs. Simmons, Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Walton, Mrs. Berg, Mrs. Root, Mrs. Evans, and Mrs. Reade slept in the seven rooms. Their combined age totaled 527 years. The apartment was leased by a woman in Queens who lived on insurance payments. The women paid her \$10 a week for their room.

"You heard what's going to happen to us?"

"What's happening?" I asked Mrs. Simmons. Mrs. Simmons had been in the apartment eleven years. She had a room with a marble washbasin. She had laid perpetual claim to the room by hanging three Godey prints.

"The owner told us that her lease is up and the landlord is going to make two apartments out of this one apartment. They've been doing it in this building. The ladies in 3W all had to move. They scattered. Like ashes. Mrs. Scott has been crying in her room for the past three days, ever since we got the news." Mrs. Scott had bought a Morris rocker at a rummage sale on Broadway. She paid four dollars for the chair. She also bought a worn Persian prayer rug. Mrs. Scott told me she bought the rug because it was made by hand. Mrs. Scott told me that she used to have her linen made to order on Madison Avenue, and only a nightgown remained of her linen.

Mrs. Berg came out of her room. She wore a paisley bathrobe. Mrs. Berg was waiting for her reparation money from Germany. "It will only be \$500" she told me, "but it will be so wonderful to have my own money in my hands, I can have my case closed, yes, and then spend my money, as I please, not foolishly, but just to spend it, I

spend the money you give me so seriously, I would like to be foolish with money just one more time. Do we have to go?" Mrs. Berg asked me.

"I'll call your landlady."

"Can't we all give the landlord of the building our rent. We each pay \$10 a week, that would be \$70 a week, that would be \$280 a month," Mrs. Simmons told me.

"I have become so attached to my room," Mrs. Berg told me. "I didn't think it would be possible."

Mrs. Berg had the corner bedroom, a room fifteen by twenty feet, with four windows, a carved fireplace, a walk-in closet, parqueted floors that she waxed twice a month, two Chippendale chairs, a high oak secretary, an Italian writing desk, a bed that she covered with half of one semimonthly check, a satin spread with venetian reds and blues. "I had to do it, Mr. Phillips," she told me. "It is such a lovely room, I wake up in it and I'm almost ashamed that I am in such a room with nothing of my own in it."

"And where can we go?" Mrs. Walton came out of her room. Her room faced north, toward the copper roofs of Columbia University. She had been born with a face like an English tearoom. But her left leg didn't grow. Three inches were missing. And for seventy-eight years her leg had been bound up in a black ugly shoe. She had no husband, no children, no living relatives, she had \$33 a month in O.A.S.I. payments. She received an additional \$49.80 in O.A.A. payments. I sent her \$5.15 a month for hearing-aid batteries.

"I'll call your landlady," I said again.

Mrs. Walton turned up the battery of her hearing aid.

"We can't just stay without Mrs. Wood? She's never

here anyway. We do all the cleaning, the kitchen and bathroom, the dusting," Mrs. Walton said.

"Mr. Phillips!"

Mrs. Reade stood at the far end of the corridor. She stood without support. Mrs. Reade called me into her room.

The other ladies went into their rooms. They seemed to know that Mrs. Reade was being swept from them. Mrs. Simmons whispered to me. "She doesn't want to go. We've been bringing her up food everyday. It's hard for her even to get to the gas range."

The doors closed and I went down the corridor to Mrs. Reade.

Mrs. Reade's room was fifty feet from the gas range. She had to walk sixty feet to get to the bathroom.

A heavy oak door closed off her room. The door had to be pushed open.

But Mrs. Reade had three windows in her room and the sun showed what a good housekeeper she was. The walnut armchair had a fresh doily. The Governor Winthrop desk was polished. The real Wilton rug swept. No dust lay on the mahogany chest. The paisley scarf covering her storage trunk was pulled taut. But the sun also showed up Mrs. Reade. I could see through her body, the sun went through her hands the way I used to shine a flashlight up against my fingers, and somehow tremble to think that my skeleton bones didn't look like me.

Mrs. Reade offered me her chair by the window.

"Now why would they want to take me away from this?" Mrs. Reade asked.

"Then don't go."

Mrs. Reade looked for the support of her favorite chair.

"Here." I got up from the walnut armchair.

Mrs. Reade wouldn't let me give her the chair.

"No, I need the standing. This will do." Mrs. Reade leaned against the steamer trunk covered with a braided rag rug.

"I'm not going then," Mrs. Reade said.

"But—"

"I don't want you to say any buts, Mr. Phillips. Can't it be just no? I'm tired of buts in my life. I seem to remember hearing but every time I had to take a step. Even this steamer trunk. My husband said not to buy it in Macon, but we won't ever need it again, he told me. We were going on a Mississippi trip then. And now I've had the steamer trunk fifty-five years. It's followed me to this room here in New York City. What is the but this time?"

"But can you shop, but can you cook, but can you go down to a restaurant to eat twice a day, if I got you a restaurant allowance. Those are the buts, Mrs. Reade. If you can shop and cook, to hell with the nursing home."

"I don't need so very much to eat now. I've been thinking of stocking up on those baby jars. The food is tasty. And it's no trouble. I just need a hot plate to heat the jars. The meat jars are awfully expensive. But I suppose they put the best meat in for the babies. But one jar would give me my three ounces of meat. That's about all I need. And I could go down from time to time for my barbecued chicken. That's what I love about New York, Mr. Phillips. Everything is within reach, even when you have nothing to reach for. But walking is a problem for me now. That I have to admit. I get dizzy. And I don't want to fall. At my age the bones break like teacups."

"Can you just make it to the bathroom and in and out of your bed? That would be enough."

"I can try until the winter. I don't think I would be able to after. But I would like to get through the summer and the fall in my room. They're such easy months to live. And this neighborhood means something to me, even if the neighborhood doesn't care about me. But that's the world. We have to make the world mean something to us. The world doesn't care. It goes on like that clock I bought for a \$1.95 in Atlanta. The clock doesn't care whether it's three or five o'clock, does it? I don't know why such a burden was put on us, to know the world for what it is. But after the winter, then I think I'll need a home, Mr. Phillips."

Mrs. Reade moved from the braided rag rug on the steamer trunk to the Governor Winthrop desk to show me that her legs didn't buckle.

"But these things," she said. "Who will help me pack? I've forgotten what's in my trunk. I guess everything but what I need."

Mrs. Reade walked to her closet door. She pulled open the door, holding onto the door for support.

"All these clothes that I haven't worn in years. Boxes and boxes of clothes. I don't know how to put everything into order."

I got up quickly and caught Mrs. Reade by her arm. Her hand had slipped trying to grab the doorknob for support. I led her to the walnut armchair. I pushed open the window.

Mrs. Reade's hands were trembling. She tried to press her hands together to stop the trembling. I saw a baby jar

of squash on her drop-leaf table. There was a can opener next to the jar. I picked up the jar. I saw Mrs. Reade had been trying to open the jar. She couldn't pry off the lid.

"I was just thinking," Mrs. Reade said, her voice trying to hear itself, she looked dazed by her near fall, as though one of her limbs had fallen to the enemy. "I get \$13.75 every fifteen days for food. That's almost a dollar a day. I could buy two jars of meat a day and five baby jars of fruits and vegetables. Then I wouldn't have to walk to that long kitchen. Why did they make it so faraway? That's squash that I like," Mrs. Reade said. "But what a funny world of children who never see a real squash."

Mrs. Reade sat back in her chair. She brought up her feet to the maple footstool.

"How did I come here?" she asked, looking into herself like a child staring at a balloon soaring into the sky away from its hand, "You were sitting here? That's what I dislike, Mr. Phillips. These sudden lapses of forgetting. It's as though you can feel your life breaking up into pieces. There's a piece now I can't fit in. How I got to this chair."

Mrs. Reade felt the arms of the chair. She made a move to get up, then settled back into the chair. She looked out of the window I had pushed open.

"I was showing you my clothes! You see, we're all of one piece. Will you tell them I want to sit here through the summer and into the fall?"

"I'll tell them if you want me to."

"I'll call you soon enough if I can't manage. It's just a few months' living that I want to get through. And after that I don't care if I go to the sun or the moon. Are the homes all bad, Mr. Phillips?"

"They aren't all bad."

"But if the good ones are only better than the bad ones, then that makes them all nasty."

Mrs. Reade got up from her armchair to walk me to the door. She refused my arm.

"I'm like a baby now that wants to get out of its crib," Mrs. Reade told me. "Do you remember how you first started to walk? The way I am now."

Mrs. Reade did go forward like an infant just getting up on two feet.

"I went out yesterday to buy a can of tuna fish. I made it all right to the delicatessen. The man told me he would make deliveries. But they charge such an awful amount of money when they deliver. I sat in the park on 106th Street for an hour. I used to see a lot of white children in the park. What's happened to the white children? Where did they go? How will these other children ever know how to talk to them or play with them or live with them? You see how well I can walk."

The Tiffany shade was still thirty feet away from us. The corridor was the length of the apartment, sixty feet. Mrs. Reade paused. She took my arm for an instant to steady herself.

"It's this darkness in the foyer," Mrs. Reade told me. "Mrs. Wood just won't put a brighter bulb in that Tiffany shade. It's a real Tiffany you know. It's beautiful under a bright shade. I've put in 100-watt bulbs."

The foyer was dark. The ladies in the rooms had all closed their doors. Usually they left their doors open, and the light filtered into the foyer.

Mrs. Reade let go of my arm and steadied herself for the thirty feet toward the Tiffany shade. The shade glowed like stained glass.

"This foyer shouldn't be so dark," Mrs. Reade said. "They have such nice old walnut paneling. Where did the people go who lived here? They didn't leave their mark on the apartment. I don't think that happens in apartments. Only in houses. We had such a nice old lovely house in Macon. Great windows and one great wall of ivy. The sun came into all of the rooms like a kitten. I don't even remember how I came to New York. How I arrived in the city. Where I first lived. This is such a strange city to come to. It's like coming to an island where you don't expect anyone to be living. And then suddenly you see millions of people like yourself. I remember how sad I used to feel when I would think that all of us were living out our lives here and then I would want to go. But here I am."

Mrs. Reade pulled open the walnut door.

"You can walk," I told Mrs. Reade.

"Tomorrow I'll try to buy a barbecued chicken and ten jars of baby food. You won't do anything until I call you?"

"I won't."

"Thank you," Mrs. Reade said. She held the door for me and I went into the elevator down to Broadway, my legs not much stronger than Mrs. Reade's.

15 Figueroa was piled up on my desk like a corpse waiting for the dissecting knife. I looked through the cluttered record for all of Figueroa's past addresses. He had lived on West 84th Street at one time. And before moving to the Chester, he had been in Dannemora. Figueroa listed his mother's address on West 105th Street as a permanent address. But the only permanent part of Figueroa was a tightly rolled ball that went skidding through his system like a glob of mercury broken loose from its glass container.

I reread Figueroa's record from beginning to end, looking for an address, a name, a hotel, a friend, a relative, a reference, a slip of the tongue made by Figueroa to an interviewer, the hide-and-seek we all play that reveals ourselves. But Figueroa spoke only for the record. I'd have to go outside of the record. To West 84th Street. To his mother's house. To Miss Fletcher's mother on East 103rd Street. The law states that the putative father of an out-of-wedlock child has to be found in order to determine the

extent of his current ability to contribute toward the needs of his child. And if the man refuses to contribute, then he has to be referred to the Special Sessions Court of New York. I wanted to find Figueroa to determine the extent of his current ability to contribute toward the human race. And I must admit, to learn what he didn't tell me about Miss Fletcher.

I went to West 84th Street. Between Amsterdam Avenue and Columbus Avenue, West 84th Street looks ugly enough to be a fake. Gangs and gangs of people hang about on the street as though waiting for the cameras to start turning on a James Cagney movie. The police patrol the block like the hands of a clock. Slow-moving cars move down the street with men hunched over the doors looking for the faces of known narcotics. The windows are flung open on all the walk-up buildings. The tenants sit looking out of the windows like Roman citizens in the Colosseum. They wait for blood. And there is blood. Combatants meet on the block as though by appointment. It is the only block on the West Side that loses its anonymity. When you cross Amsterdam Avenue you feel you have stepped into every Hollywood, French, and Italian movie you ever saw on a smoky afternoon at the Apollo on 42nd Street.

I went to Figueroa's address on West 84th Street, an address that appeared on the application form. A great double building with hundreds of rooms. The building looked as though it had been exposed to shellfire. I knocked on the super's door.

The super wore a yachting cap with gold braid and a striped T-shirt that made him look as though he had just come to New York from the port of Marseilles. His face

was scarred, strong, his body lean, his hands looked like a tractor on the move. His eyes were remarkable. They held his field of vision like the bore end of a rifle. His name was Cortez, Freddie Cortez, and he spoke English.

"Do you remember anyone by the name of Figueroa Mullina?" I asked.

"Describe him," the super said, "I get a thousand names here."

"He lived here about a year ago. He likes to dress in expensive clothes. He likes women. He had just come out of prison. He also likes to sleep late."

"Let me look at the book. I keep a record of everybody under their name. The police are always asking me questions and I find it easier to answer questions this way."

Cortez invited me into his apartment. The TV set was tuned to a flickering English murder story. I recognized the rumpled mackintosh. Cortez picked up a ledger book and thumbed for the heading Mullina.

"Here he is. He lived in 3W4. He only stayed here five weeks."

"Do you remember him?"

"His face looked like it had a few brains? Just over the edge? I think he used to bring a colored woman here, a real black one, she would only stay a couple of hours."

"Did he bring anyone else?"

"I only remember the black one. She looked like a woman. She looked naked when you looked at her. I like that."

"How often did she come?"

"I'm always in the front, watching who comes in and who goes out. You have to keep a house like this like it's under guard. Otherwise the whole place goes wild. Then

you can't keep it down. I saw her come about five times. But once a week would be enough with a woman like that. She went up the stairs with him as though she was going to suck him down into her. I don't know how he stood up to her. But I guess he did. She kept coming back for more."

"Did she look like she used the stuff?"

"I don't think she needed anything. Mullina might have. Nobody moves on this block unless they're in it, one way or another."

"It's a rough block," I said.

"Rough? C'mon out with me." The super took me into the hallway. He showed me a phone ripped out of the wall. He pointed to the upstairs rooms.

"The junkies did that. They break into everything, they roam from room to room stealing what they can lay their hands on. I can't be up day and night, so it's up to the tenants to look after themselves. They steal dirty underwear, milk bottles, food, clothes, radios, razor blades, TV sets, anything they can carry. I can fight them in the day but at night I like my sleep. Look at this!"

The super pulled up his T-shirt. He pointed out the knife wounds on his chest and back, long scars.

"I had to fight off these bastards until they got to know me. Now most of the junkies leave me alone but it's still rough."

"Have you seen Mullina on the block recently?"

"No."

"If you see him, would you call me?" I wrote out my name, telephone number, and extension. Cortez put the information in his dossier wallet.

"And the black woman?" he asked.

"I know where she is."

"Good for you! I would like to try to put out that fire in her. I know when a woman has it. They look beautiful when they walk up a flight of stairs to go into a room. Their haunches shake like a race horse. They're moist and ready to go. But they race to nowhere. I have a woman like that now. She doesn't even give me a chance to watch TV."

Cortez walked me to the stoop. He looked up and down West 84th Street like a hiring boss.

"Look at these cars." He pointed. "Cadillacs, Oldsmobiles, Continentals, Chryslers. They're all new models. I drive a '57 Chevy. And everybody on this street is on welfare. I know everybody in this house is. But I wouldn't take it for \$100 a week. It kills a man more than dope." Cortez brought his thumb up like the point of a hypodermic needle and pressed his thumb into his arm. "They carry dead junkies out of this building like chickens from the A & P." Cortez laughed. "The junkies kill each other. And the cops around here always hit a man right in the back of the head with a .32. Never the arms or legs or back, always the head. To make sure they're dead, like rattlesnakes."

Cortez promised to telephone me if he saw Figueroa in the neighborhood. He pointed with a nod of his head toward a black unmarked prowler car.

"If Mullina is on the stuff he knows better than to come back to this street. But with that woman of his he doesn't need anything but a strong back."

I left Cortez on the stoop and walked toward Amsterdam Avenue to get the bus to 105th Street. I could almost see Mrs. Fletcher naked under her housecoat hurrying up 84th Street to see Figueroa, hurrying past the men stand-

ing like sleeping volcanoes, picking out Figueroa because he could appreciate her without ever quieting her.

Just as I got to the corner of Amsterdam Avenue a police car with its red light circling and its siren wailing like the opening of a slum ballet came turning into 84th Street. The heads stuck out of the windows. I saw a gang of children rush toward the squad car. Two more squad cars came rushing into 84th Street. The police came out of their cars with their guns unlimbered. They rushed up the stairs of a brownstone. Everybody watched, waiting for the shots. Two more cars entered the street, blockading 84th Street. The police swung out of their cars with more guns. I waited with the crowd. The police held their guns limp, ready to straighten them out like a whip. The crowd was silent. The people in the basement of the brownstone peered up the stoop. A baby sucked on a pacifier. I stood next to a squad car, marveling at the police entering the brownstone with drawn guns, ready to exchange the squat pellets of lead that could mean their annihilation.

The police came out of the brownstone with a man I recognized, Emile Pacheco, a thin Puerto Rican who worked as a bus boy. He was contributing seven dollars a week toward the support of a baby born in December. Pacheco was bleeding from a cut on his face. The police held him by both arms, leading him down the stoop. Pacheco smiled weakly at the crowd. His white shirt was covered with blood. His face had been cut. His eye was swollen. The police rushed him into a squad car and Pacheco was gone. I asked one of the police what happened. Pacheco had fought with another tenant about stealing food from the community refrigerator. The tenant pulled a knife and Pacheco started swinging a beer bottle. Pacheco

hit him on the head with the beer bottle and he hadn't regained consciousness. The police told me that Pacheco was trying to cut the tenant's throat with the broken beer bottle when they arrived.

I walked back to Amsterdam Avenue, passing one of the almost extinct housewives from Central Park West. She wheeled her baby in a blue lightweight stroller, carrying a bag of groceries. She looked at the crowd in front of Pacheco's brownstone and she bit her lower lip, and I could almost hear her silently resolve that nothing would make her flee Manhattan, nothing, she would hold on, she had chosen to live in Manhattan and now she wouldn't flee. But 850,000 persons had fled New York.

I rode the Amsterdam Avenue bus to 105th Street and climbed the five flights to Figueroa's mother.

Mrs. Mullina recognized me through the one-way glass in her door.

"Mr. Phillips!"

I heard the police lock scraping on the linoleum. I had to squeeze past the iron bar to get into the kitchen. Mrs. Mullina had two rooms, a kitchen and a sleeping room that faced 105th Street, the green trees growing on the grounds of the Hebrew Home For The Aged.

Mrs. Mullina put out the cigarette she was holding. I noticed the ash tray was filled with cigarettes.

"The doctors tell me not to smoke, Mr. Phillips, but if I don't smoke then I burn up. I need the cigarettes. So I smoke." As she spoke, she took a fresh cigarette from the pack on the table. Mrs. Mullina had lost weight since I had last seen her. Her clothes hung. She sat limply in the leatherette chair. But Mrs. Mullina looked remarkably like a toughened New York businesswoman. Only because

of her physical face, leathery, lean, and when she smoked she looked as though she was making a decision as to whether to live or die. Mrs. Mullina had tuberculosis, arrested, and she kept it arrested, she told me, by working.

"The cigarettes cost me more than food. I need two quarts of milk a day and a chicken. But I make rice and beans. The beans are like chicken in Puerto Rico." Mrs. Mullina pointed to the stove, the boiling pot of rice. "Do you know what I heard in church last Sunday, that three-quarters of the people of the entire world live on rice and I thought only Puerto Ricans lived on rice."

Mrs. Mullina got up from the kitchen chair to pour me some black coffee.

"Is Figueroa still getting checks from you?" Mrs. Mullina asked.

"Don't you see him?"

"Not the way a mother should."

"When did you last see him?"

"I think three weeks ago. He came up to borrow ten dollars from me."

"Did you give it to him?"

"I only had seven dollars to give him."

"Did he tell you what the money was for?"

"He said he had a baby by a girl. Do you know the girl?"

"Yes, I know her."

"What is she like? Is she getting checks from you?"

"The girl is very nice. But she is getting checks from us."

"So it's another family getting the checks. Why don't you tell my son to find work. He can work. He can't get by like a pigeon all of his life."

"Did he say anything to you about the girl?"

"Just that she was staying in his place. In his place! His bed isn't big enough for him to sleep on. I asked him if he was going to marry the girl. He said the baby came before he was thinking of getting married, and he wouldn't marry because of the baby. I asked him how the girl will live? How the baby would live? He told me that nobody goes hungry in New York. I asked him to bring the girl here with the baby. I have a kitchen, I have a refrigerator that works. He said no. He said he would find another way. I think he was frightened of my sickness. He thinks I gave him his sickness. He thinks I only have to breathe and cough and people will die like flies. I am not so sick and I am closer to life than to death. So I work. And I smoke cigarettes. Where does the girl live now with the baby? Not still in his room?"

"She found a furnished room on Central Park West. It's not far from your place here."

"One of those rooms like his? One of those rotten rooms? How does the government let them stand? And the rents, only the people with no money can afford them, the people you send checks to. Why don't you stop the checks until the rooms are made clean? I don't understand it. And the babies! Does God see all this? The babies are God's. It is so strange to me that we see more than God does. Don't the priests tell Him? I tell God in church. I tell Him every morning and night. He knows. I think He is waiting for us to know. But we know. Then who is it that doesn't know or care? I asked Figueroa if I could see his baby. If I could help the girl. If she was alone. Figueroa acted like he wanted the girl to be alone, by herself, maybe to punish her for having the baby."

The coffee boiled in the open pot. Mrs. Mullina poured me more coffee.

"Do you know these things about people?" Mrs. Mullina asked me. "Why wouldn't my son bring the girl here? Why wouldn't he permit me to see the baby? How does he let the baby live on the checks? How can a girl with a new baby go to live in a room like the rooms I know? It's no good to ask him, he never answers a question. I think he is waiting for somebody to stick him with a knife or to shoot him, and then he can die like his father, before he knows he has completely failed."

Mrs. Mullina opened the plastic bread box on the kitchen table and took out a package of hard round cookies. She placed the cookies on a dinner plate.

"Why don't you close his case?" she asked me.

"I did close his case this morning. Figuero moved from his room. He didn't call me up to give me his new address. I closed his case because we don't know where he's living. That means he won't get his check on the eighteenth. It also means that maybe he doesn't need the check. But I still have to talk to him because of the baby. He has to support the baby or else tell the court why he can't. I thought maybe you would know where he is."

Mrs. Mullina looked around the room as I spoke and I looked, too, to see if one of Figueroa's neckties was folded on a chair.

"He not here," Mrs. Mullina quickly told me. "I don't want to hide him! I want him to be standing where the arrows fall!"

Mrs. Mullina got up from the table and hurried over to the stove. She turned off the pot of boiling rice. She put

out her cigarette and lit a new cigarette. She leaned against the sink and coughed, remembering to put her hand over her mouth. She went into the heavily curtained sleeping room and asked me to come too.

Mrs. Mullina showed me a photograph of Figueroa colored in oils. He looked stiff, starched, obedient to the camera.

"That's before he began. Before he began being what I don't know he is now. I was his mother when he was born, but not since. I would give the girl these two rooms if she wants them for the baby. This is a quiet house, Mr. Phillips. The superintendent locks the door all day. There are no bad people here. The families all go to work. There is a man in each apartment but in mine. The apartments are all clean with nice new furniture. You can see the stairway was washed. I will give the girl the apartment if she wants it. I can find another room. Will you ask the girl?"

Mrs. Mullina looked at the stiff framed photograph as though Figueroa should answer. She walked over to the window and drew up the window shade. The sun burst into the room. The walls were painted white, the room austere, with only three pieces, a bed, a chair, a chest of drawers. There was no TV set.

"You see, there is room for a crib. Will you ask the girl?"

"Of course I'll ask her."

"The baby can have the sun."

Mrs. Mullina pulled down the window shade.

"I don't like the sun in the room. It hurts my eyes. My eyes are dim now. I don't see like I used to, and sometimes I think it's better. Tell me, Mr. Phillips, is the baby

all right, the baby is healthy, she's not in the clinic like the Puerto Rican mothers on this street? The clinic, the clinic, there is no husband, the clinic is the father!"

Mrs. Mullina told me she had to leave for work. She cleaned house for three different women on West 96th Street. Each woman hired her for one-half day a week, and Mrs. Mullina was able to earn \$18.75 a week, plus her car-fare. "I have the mornings, two days a week, and Saturday and Sunday to rest," she told me.

Mrs. Mullina walked me to the corner of Central Park West.

"In what building is the girl?" she asked me.

I pointed to Winna's building.

"I pass this building," Mrs. Mullina told me, "I pass and I see the children, and I see the mothers, and they look to me like they are still in sleep, even the children, they look like vegetables that don't have faces. But you know they have faces, you talk to them, for you they have terrible faces!"

Mrs. Mullina looked into the doorway of Winna's building.

"This girl, Miss Fletcher, she is a woman?" Mrs. Mullina asked.

"She's a woman," I said.

"But she knows what my son is?"

"She wants to find out."

"Oh!" Mrs. Mullina cried. "I know now when I am dead the world goes on the world." She took a step toward the littered stoop.

"Can we go in to see her now? I want to see her and the baby! This is no place for a girl and a baby. I can

work five days and die on the sixth day. I can give money to the baby!"

Mrs. Mullina took my arm. She led me up the stoop. I saw Mr. Winna sitting in his cubbyhole. A portable fan blew into his face. But his face was still wet, permanently wet, like clay.

"The girl isn't in," Winna told me.

Mrs. Mullina said to me, "Ask him if the baby is in the room."

"Did she take her baby with her?"

"She did, she doesn't leave the baby with the girls on her floor."

I walked Mrs. Mullina to West 96th Street and I caught the 96th Street bus to Lexington Avenue. I sat by an open window. I looked back at Mrs. Mullina going into a great windowed building on 96th Street to run the sweeper, to dust down the blinds. Mrs. Mullina made me promise that I would see Miss Fletcher and get an answer about the apartment. "I'll look for Figueroa," Mrs. Mullina told me, "he only has a few places where he feels himself and I will go to them to find him."

I was on my way through Central Park to Mrs. Fletcher's house in East Harlem, an address Mrs. Mullina wouldn't go to.

I got off at 96th Street and Lexington Avenue and came to the hill that catapults you into East Harlem.

16

The descent down the hill from the top of East 102nd Street to East 103rd Street is the steepest, shortest, most awesome descent in New York, unless you pull off the top of a manhole cover.

I went straight to Mrs. Fletcher's house on East 103rd Street.

Mrs. Fletcher called to me through the metal door asking me to wait. I could hear her say to herself, locked in a cage.

The police lock was stuck. Mrs. Fletcher tried to force the lock. The lock dug into the flooring. The thick steel rod wouldn't budge. I pressed against the door, trying to push the rod, but the rod held fast. That was the job of the police lock. The rod braced against the door made it possible to sleep at night. The police lock was the New York equivalent of the wooden doors in Paris, the great doors that close on the Paris apartments like a besieged fort. There are a few such doors in New York just as most of Europe is scattered around the city. But the police lock had priority even over a TV set in East Harlem.

Mrs. Fletcher pushed the door shut. I heard her jangle the lock. Mrs. Fletcher pulled on the doorknob. The lock swung free.

Mrs. Fletcher stood in the doorway like a lion burst from its cage. Where should the lion go now that it's free?

The hallway steps led down into East Harlem. The lion knew the dimensions of its cage.

Mrs. Fletcher backed into her kitchen.

I stood in the doorway, waiting for Mrs. Fletcher's invitation. She had to invite me in. The door always had to be open. Mrs. Fletcher made me pause, then she pointed to a kitchen chair.

I sat down at the kitchen table, messy with spilt milk and crumbs of toast. Mrs. Fletcher wiped the table with a wet sponge. But not before I saw her take away the two coffee cups, one half filled with black coffee and soaking cigarette butts. And not before I saw her bend over the kitchen table, her breasts falling free from her housecoat, breasts that still hung to fit a man's palm. She wore a belt around her housecoat, pulled tight at the waist, flinging out her hips. By now I assumed that Mrs. Fletcher was naked under her housecoat.

"I'm looking for Figueroa," I told Mrs. Fletcher.

"Why should I know where he's at?"

"I just asked. I have to ask everybody who knows him."

"Doesn't my daughter know?"

"Figueroa moved out of the Chester. He didn't tell your daughter where he was going and he didn't tell me."

"Did you close his case then?"

"This morning."

"Then what do you need with him?"

"Figueroa has a baby to support."

"Him?" Him! But said to castrate. Mrs. Fletcher couldn't keep back her street voice. The voice you hear in Harlem when no white man is listening. The street is where you learn it. In Harlem, East Harlem, the Lower East Side, Little Italy, in any of the New York neighborhoods where the builders ruled out cross ventilation, you get the street. The families rush into the street to breathe. Just to breathe. The street becomes the teacher. The Harlem street teaches you who hustles, who peddles dope, who handles the numbers, who sells wine after hours, who sells the dollar chicken dinners, who steals, who buys what's stolen, who's in, who's out, how to hold a knife, join a gang, kick a man in the side of his head, crawl up a fire escape, break into an automobile, get into the St. Nicholas Street clubs where everybody seems to be gliding on one-inch-thick carpeting, to say man, man, because you know you can't ever be a man, the street develops the language of the taunt, how are you, man? crazy, real crazy, the street is what Harlem fights and those who escape the street become as legendary as John Brown. The rest stand on the Harlem corners like stalks of corn caught in a drought.

"'Him' is the father of your daughter's baby," I told Mrs. Fletcher. "He signed the form. You know what that means."

"It means he was buying time so he didn't have to go up in front of a judge."

"But he'll have to go."

"He's not going to support that baby. He cares more about a spot on his necktie than that baby. I don't know why he signed the form. He told me that he wasn't going to. He told me would go to San Francisco first or L.A. He told me a baby means death. You see yourself going no-

where but into the grave when you have a baby. He's scared, he wants to fly, but he can't fly. Just send the checks to my daughter and let Figueroa go."

"And how does a baby grow without a father?"

"You're going to live until you die." Which was what the girl said in Winna's building who sold her first baby for \$500.

"When did you last see Figueroa?"

"About four days ago."

"Did he say anything to you then?"

"Just that you were after him."

"Which way?"

"To get off the payroll."

"Did he think that was so bad?"

"When you're scared it's like pulling away the ladder."

"What's Figueroa scared of?"

"You know him from the record."

"And you know what's not in the record," I said, but with no inflection of what I knew about West 84th Street.

"I don't know that man or any man!" Mrs. Fletcher dumped the coffee cups into the sink. She turned the faucet and rinsed the cups. "Can I get you some coffee?" she asked.

"I'd like some."

Mrs. Fletcher looked at me in surprise.

"Most of you people won't even take a glass of water."

"The law says no gifts."

"The law says. The Lord says. I think I just stay alive to prove that I can do it!" Mrs. Fletcher rinsed the sponge and wiped the table down again.

"And Figueroa. I've got to find him for your daughter. She wants his name on the birth certificate."

"That she got from me. I never put her father's name on the birth certificate. I just didn't think of it when I was lying in a ward in that Cleveland hospital. I thought that was done by the city or the hospital or whoever does it. I paid \$15 here in Harlem to get a fake certificate made up for Kenny with her father's name on the damn thing. Only it isn't a god-damn thing. Everybody wants to see that piece of paper. They don't believe you're alive without it."

Mrs. Fletcher opened a jar of instant coffee.

"And with it, it doesn't make any difference either. There hasn't been a birth certificate in our family yet. We just grow, like weeds. But now the weeds don't want to be weeds. The weeds want to be growing on the front lawns. That's all you hear from colored now, they want to be gardenias, lilacs, violets, roses, but they all stink. They're all like everybody else, they're for their own. They don't want to see that they're like everybody else. That makes it too hard being colored then."

"But you want Kenny to be colored."

"I want her to be proud."

Mrs. Fletcher poured the boiling water over the instant coffee. In an instant the coffee bubbled up black. She put the coffee down in front of me. I noticed that her face looked full, I saw a soft fullness over her body.

Mrs. Fletcher thought I was looking at her body, her naked body, the body going up the stairs on West 84th Street. She stood in front of me, quickly, like a tide inviting the plunge, then she turned and went to the stove to pour herself a cup of coffee.

"And Figueroa?" I asked.

"Why don't you leave him run!" She leaned against the stove, thrusting her body out. "He's not black, he's not

white, he's not a man, he's nothing, they ought to cut his body up into pieces and give the pieces to the people who need them, an eye for the blind, a foot for the crippled, a hand for the armless. That's the way I think about him now."

"But you saw him four days ago."

"Me he makes feel good. I know him. You know how you can blow your nose with your own dirty handkerchief. But somebody else's dirty handkerchief makes you want to vomit. That's the way I feel about Figueroa."

"What do you need with him?"

"How much do you know about everything? Jesus, I never thought I could talk so much about myself. What's the use of all the words about me? Kenny wanted me to go to the place where she went where a doctor talked to you. What about? What could I tell the doctor? He'd listen to me for ten minutes and then close up shop. Do you know, sometimes in the middle of the night when I'm stretched out in bed and just helpless with sleep then I feel like flying, then I dream, then I can see myself, like the chances I had in Cleveland. What were my chances? I might have married a white man. I could have Kenny's name on a birth certificate. I could have one of those houses in Cleveland where they don't care if you're black or white as long as you pay \$2,000 over the mortgage. I could have enough kids to make it rich even on welfare. I stopped five babies in the last eight years. I just wouldn't have them come out of me. Not with what I know. But none of that happened. I came to New York. This is where the colored people come when they've lost their color. They think they can get white in New York. But this is the blackest colored city I've ever seen. The white people don't look at you

here in New York. They don't want to know you're alive. They just don't see you. That's what tears the colored people to pieces in New York. That's why I stay here. Because this is where I deserve to be. But in the middle of the night I can still see the world the way some whites live it."

"If you know all this, then what do you need with Figueroa?"

"I only know what other people know! Everybody knows the same thing! Nothing changes. Nobody knows more than anybody else. I don't need Figueroa for knowing."

"Then what do you need him for?"

"I don't need him! And I told you I don't know where he is!"

"You saw him four days ago!"

"God made the world in seven. He should have taken a couple of more weeks!"

"What did Figueroa tell you four days ago?"

"I told you he never says anything. You know there are people like that. They talk and talk and never say anything. You never know what they think and you can't make sense of what they're saying. But it's nice talk. It's talk that takes away the afternoon. Figueroa likes to come up here in the afternoon. This is his home, East Harlem. Only he's really afraid to hang around here. They might get him going on junk again and then he's finished. They like to frame pushers like Figueroa. He's perfect for an arrest deal with the police. He'd be a two-time loser. He likes his freedom, like the squirrels in Central Park. He came up here about two in the afternoon. He was wearing a new cotton suit. He told me a friend gave him the suit. He had on an expensive blue tie that he bought out of his

\$2.15 for a clothing allowance. He sat in that chair you're sitting in now. He drank three cups of coffee. He told me he went to see a movie where a girl walks around naked with a bed sheet. He told me he went to a used-car lot in Queens about a job, but the manager guessed he had done time, and that ended that. He told me Kenny was pestering him about money. He told me he couldn't go to the loan sharks because he wasn't in a position to pay back. He said here he was walking around as free as a tiger in a jungle and there was a wall ten feet high all around him. He drank five cups of coffee and kept asking how you can jump over the fence. How could he break clean and run? He said he just wanted to keep running in the clear. But he didn't move out of the chair. He told me Alberto Reane was picked up on 106th Street with a package of junk. He told me Manuel Ballard was found in the East Bronx with half of his head chopped off. He told me that Kenny was living on Central Park West in a house with more junkies than Rikers Island. He told me about a fifteen-year-old girl he met who has been on junk for the past six years. He told me he went into a store on Broadway to buy the baby a sweater and he couldn't take the money out of his pocket. He told me he just froze up and hurried out of the store. Why, he asked me. Because he doesn't talk to more people than me. That baby wants to pull me in, he told me. I told you he's afraid of going down into that deep pit we call living. He doesn't know his way. But he's good for talk and he's a good man for a woman. He makes a woman want to protect him, to make things easy for him, that's the kind of man black women like, then everybody gets what's not coming to them. He talked away three hours without saying anything, just drinking the coffee and pick-

ing on a ham sandwich. Then he got up from the chair and came over to me and took off my housecoat and he tumbled me right down on the kitchen floor because he knew that was what I was waiting for and that at least he could still do! Do you want to know anything else?"

Mrs. Fletcher pulled off the belt from her housecoat. She pulled open her housecoat. She shoved the housecoat down from her shoulders. She stood at the stove, naked, her breasts jutting forward, which she reached and squeezed, and then she brought her hands to her stomach and pressed her hands deep into the folds of her stomach.

"You ask so many questions! Now look!"

I saw what the fullness of her face meant. She was pregnant. But just at the beginning of her pregnancy. Her body was just beginning to round itself.

"You can see," she told me, "you saw it before. Now see it for real!"

She brought her hands down to her thighs and thrust them into her and then she fell in a fold on the floor, pulling the housecoat around her.

Mrs. Fletcher sat for an instant on the linoleum floor, as though dazed at what she had done. Then she put on her housecoat and sat down at the kitchen table, her hands wet with perspiration, her long knuckled fingers clinging to one another. I could see why some of us fold our hands in prayer. The fingers won't pull free. The fingers cling to one another, as though the body has finally solved the problem of its being apart. We have to unbend our hands to be really free.

Mrs. Fletcher was no longer naked under her housecoat. She was fully dressed, like a chicken waiting with an unerring eye for the knife to come to its throat.

"This baby won't see the daylight I see, not with what I know. I'm going to stick my hands in and pull it out like pus."

"Why don't you let the baby see for itself?"

"She'd have to look out of my eyes for a longer time than I would want anybody to."

"Didn't Kenny?"

"I left Kenny with my sister in Cleveland. My sister got out of it, but I don't know how. Maybe it was from reading the Bible. But you see a Bible in every house in Harlem. You see them when they're fat from bread and noodles reading the golden word for today on every Lenox Avenue bus. It doesn't help them any. But my sister got out. It was almost as though she made a pact with God and he agreed to let her get through the pigsty. That's the way I've always felt about her. That's why I left Kenny with her. Kenny came out of me in eighteen minutes. She smiled at me five days after she was born. None of those gas pains. But a real smile. She laughed out loud when she was two weeks old. That laughter told me to give her to my sister to bring up. I didn't get out of the gate. I didn't have any pacts with God. My sister didn't have a birth certificate. But she had herself. I never knew anyone who grew out of themselves like my sister. She seemed to be always adding on to herself like a person building a bridge to God. That's what she used to say. There's God that's perfect, there's us that aren't so perfect, that's the way we have to go. She died on August 3, 1952. I remember the day she died. Because then I looked at this place and I saw Kenny in it. I walked out of these rooms into East Harlem and into Harlem and into all the streets that look worse than the pig slop at home and I walked to find one

little god-damn piece of space that I could move into with Kenny. I thought that was the least I could do for my dead sister. But there was nothing and what there was was worse."

Mrs. Fletcher got up to turn on the window fan. The big blades whirled and I could feel the soot blowing into the kitchen.

"I had to explain to my investigator where I got this fan. I couldn't tell him the truth that I paid \$29 for it at Vim's. I told him a girl friend got picked up by the police for narcotics and she said I could have the fan. That story he believed. But you see what the fan blows. Soot in from the air shaft. The bedroom's no better. There's a brick wall in front of my windows that I feel was plastered in over my head. Do you want to see where Kenny slept?"

Mrs. Fletcher led me into a room about eight feet wide and nine feet long. There was a window in the room but the window was closed. I could see rat poison seeds spread out on the window sill. No sunlight came through the window. Mrs. Fletcher had to turn on the light. The room had a single bed, a chair, and a maple chest. And on the chair was a yellow-and-black striped silk rep tie.

I looked to see if the bed had been recently slept in. The white chenille spread was pulled taut and the room had the expectant look of waiting for a paying tenant.

"Do you know why I keep the window closed?"

"I can see." I pointed to the familiar seeds, and then I pointed to Figueroa's necktie.

"That's his tie," Mrs. Fletcher said, "Figueroa likes to leave his neckties. I don't know why. They say people leave things so they can come back again."

"I know his neckties already. Look, is Figueroa staying here with you?"

"He's not! The only thing staying with me now are my god-damn thirty-nine years!" Mrs. Fletcher pointed to her stomach. "This is going out before the end of the month."

"What does Figueroa say?"

"It's not his baby! Did you think that? I'd eat this and take us both!" Mrs. Fletcher grabbed up the seeds on the window sill. She threw the seeds on the floor.

Mrs. Fletcher sat down on the chair in the room, spreading her legs far apart, holding her knees. The room was stifling. And the whirling fan sent soot flying through the entire apartment. I could feel the grit under my feet. The collar of my shirt felt dirty. The cotton was a hair shirt. I walked out of the room into the kitchen. The fan at least blew in some of the stale air from the air shaft. The air shaft is a New York euphemism for an open-air sewer.

Mrs. Fletcher followed me into the kitchen. She went up to the fan and let it blow over her. She opened her housecoat and let the fan blow on her chest.

"This is the way my heart's beating," she told me, "as fast as this fan is blowing. I can feel my blood trying to find a way out. No wonder they used to bleed us at home. My mother liked to be bled. Once a year she got herself opened up. One night she bled for real. She hemorrhaged when she tried to stop her seventh baby. This is the color of my death's blood, she cried out to us when she began to see the bright red blood, and she didn't stop moaning until she was dead. I picked up her hand when she was dead and I saw it fall back on the bed, and I said are people dead just like that? Do you know what a funeral is among

colored people? It's their glory. It's the one time in their lives that they don't know they're colored. My mother looked like a waxed cantelope in her coffin. They should have buried her with her real face. Do you know why I'm telling you all this?"

Mrs. Fletcher pointed to my black notebook on the kitchen table.

"Not for that miserable thing! I want you to know Figueroa didn't father the baby in me. He didn't! I know it! Like my mother knew when to start moaning. I'm getting rid of the baby and I don't want any of it down in the notebooks, or down in Kenny's head. I have enough of me down in the notebooks, and she's had enough of me beating my head against every wall in New York. I'm sick I ever got started. I don't want to answer any more for myself. If you put it in the record they'll bother me for John Williams and William John and Joseph Jones and they'll be sending out hundreds of pieces of paper and none of the paper will make me more than what I am. Listen to what I am!"

17

I listened to Mrs. Fletcher. She told me Reese Fletcher had been kicked to death in Cleveland. He liked to go to the Negro bars in Cleveland. He got into a whisky fight and two men kicked his head against the Central Avenue pavement. He went into a coma and never regained consciousness. Mrs. Fletcher told me she buried him and she was the only one to go to his funeral. She and her sister. She said she borrowed \$250 to bury him and then got the money back from the social security people. She said Fletcher had no relatives in Chicago or Cleveland. She said they never married. But he wanted to marry her. She told me she was afraid of marrying a white man. She told me she never completely trusted Fletcher. Only when he forgot she was colored. A couple of times, she told me, he would forget, when he was no longer what he was but what we all are. And that was in bed, Mrs. Fletcher told me, and only when I felt like making him feel like a man. I'd always surprise him. He didn't know when it was

coming from me. And what did I give him? Just quiet. I'd go all quiet on him when he was big and wanting to explode. Just quiet. I never told Kenny that he was dead. I don't want her to know that he's dead. I want her to think she has a father. Because a father is what we need. I never had a father! My mother never had a father! Fletcher didn't have a father! Kenny didn't have a father! Figueroa didn't have a father! What is a father, Mrs. Fletcher asked me, is he a man who gets himself nailed up on a cross with his legs hanging down and blood running out of his hands? Did you have a father, Mrs. Fletcher asked me, do you have a father now? If you do, tell me about him, tell me what it's like to have a father!

I left Mrs. Fletcher without telling her what a father was. She knew. We all know.

I started down the stairs of the building put up in the 1870's when New York invented its railroad flats, the most ugly city apartments in the entire world.

I looked for Figueroa coming up the stairs. The police lock wasn't stuck. It slid open at my touch when I opened the door. The window leading to the fire escape was open, the curtains were out on the fire escape, though no breeze blew. Figueroa had gone down to the street, or up to the roof.

The roof Miss Fletcher had described to me. The roof where the pushers peddled narcotics like popcorn.

I hurried up the stairs leading to the roof and stepped into the tangled jungle of TV aerials. The aerials hung crazily against the sky, all the prongs pointing toward the Empire State Building. The tar was soft from the sun. The roof was joined to the other roofs. Every roof was matted with TV aerials. The TV aerials should have been tuned

in on the roofs, the police coming up the stairs to no one's surprise, the fifteen-year-old addicts interrupting their prayers to run like frightened hares into the brush. I saw three white envelopes stuck in the soft tar. I bent to pick up one of the envelopes and Figueroa said, "They're all empty. These kids don't waste a whiff."

Figueroa smiled at me. He was standing behind the door to the roof.

"You should be a cop," he told me.

"I couldn't pass the physical."

"But you can climb roofs."

"Miss Fletcher told me about this roof. She said there would be shooting parties of fifteen to twenty kids, all of them sticking needles into their arms. And the police would raid the roofs about three times a week. She told me about one pusher the kids threw off the roof. He got into an eleven-year-old sister of a seventeen-year-old who was a steady customer. The kids got him up to the roof to do business and then they picked him up and threw him off the roof like a garbage bag."

"It happens," Figueroa said, "more often."

I moved away from the edge of the roof. The builders weren't generous with their parapet.

"Did she tell you I was up here?" Figueroa asked. Figueroa pointed downward to Mrs. Fletcher's apartment.

"She told me that she hasn't seen you in four days. I just came up here because of what I remembered about the roof."

"Have you seen enough of the roof?" Figueroa asked.

"I think so."

"Then let's go down into the street. I don't like these roofs in East Harlem. Look at them! One building stuck

up against the next building, and the backs of the buildings look on each other like the ends of a subway platform. You used to be able to breathe on these roofs. But the TV aerials cut that out. How can you breathe when you're up to your neck in this crap? But no wonder they use the roofs now to take the stuff in East Harlem. This is the only place left where you can stretch out your arms and try to fly after you get the stuff into you. What's the use of taking it, if you can't get off the ground? Even the guy they threw off the roof had a ball. He flew wide open to meet the sidewalk. It was probably the only time in his life that he ever took off. I knew that pusher. His name was Gregorio. He was trying to make a deal on the kids to pay off a loan shark."

Figueroa held back the door to the stairs. The sun lit the stairs. The stairs were wooden, splintered with age.

"This is the way I used to go down in the morning after sleeping all night on the roof," Figueroa told me. "There weren't any TV aerials then. You could see about half the sky then. I got shaken up when I heard how many stars there were in the sky. Millions, I heard, millions on top of millions, and more millions on top of that, and then you started with the billions and billions on top of that and each star was millions and billions of miles away from each other and not just ordinary miles, but miles that had a dozen zeros after them, and all that I could see with my fourteen-year-old head. I got a bigger bang out of that than getting laid. What for, I used to say when I was a kid, what for, what's it for? And when I came down from the roof, down these god-damn steps, down into the hallways that didn't have any light and my eyes were half blind from the sun coming up, when I walked through the hallway to

our place, the rooms in the back, and saw that the sun couldn't get in, couldn't even sneak in, that the kitchen light was on and lights were on in the bedroom, and I knew that outside the sun was as big as balls, then I didn't know what the hell to do with myself."

The metal door to the roof banged shut. The light was cut off on the stairs. I reached for the railing. Figueroa was behind me.

"Pitch-black like this," Figueroa said, "for more years than I want to remember. Wait a minute, I'll get the door."

Figueroa hurried up the stairs and kicked the door open. The sun flooded the stairway. Figueroa looped a string on the door handle to a nail. The door stayed open.

"Fourteen!"

Figueroa pointed to himself on the top of the stairway, his back to the sun. He turned and looked up at the sun and then squinted down the stairway. He rubbed his eyes and started down the stairs, holding onto the railing. I tried to see Figueroa at the age of fourteen as he wanted me to see him, his eyes blinded by the sun, his head hearing for the first time those songs as curiously familiar as the sea sounds buried in the pink lip of a conch shell. But Figueroa made the mistake in thinking it was something special that he even heard the sea in the sea shell. The sound is there, locked in the shell. You just have to pick up the shell and listen. You just have to look up and there is the sky. You just have to be out at night and there are the stars. You just have to look at the sky for five minutes and all of its immensity swoops down on you. The millions and millions that Figueroa talked about don't mean a damn thing. It might mean something if we had to wait millions and millions of years to see a star. But there they

are! Like babies. More than we know what to do with. There is even a federation to save children.

I saw the children. They stood on the fourth-floor landing as though they had assembled there during the night. They all wore high-top sneakers, white T-shirts, and black chino pants. The leader was tall and thin, and he held a dangling baseball bat. There were six children on the landing. The oldest looked fifteen, the youngest ten. The leader with the baseball bat motioned to me. Figueroa was at my side. The other children spread themselves out in a flank to blockade the stairway.

"You," the leader said, "do you live in this building?"

I shifted the black notebook, the notebook that is more familiar in East Harlem than sunlight.

The leader understood the notebook. He pointed to the book with his baseball bat.

"Are you one of them?"

"I am," I said.

"But not for this house, we know the guy for this house, Davis, everybody in this house gets it, everybody, on all the floors. You were up to the roof?"

"To cool off a little." I opened my seersucker jacket and showed my wet shirt. The humidity in Mrs. Fletcher's apartment had wrung into my clothes.

"It's hot," the leader said. He didn't speak toughly. But he was fifteen. And he was a child. And children are a terror in an adult world when they forget they are children.

"The humidity," I said.

"It's hot with the humidity. Okay." The leader moved away from the landing. The ten-year-old stopped staring at me as though he had already claimed the right to squash out my eyeballs. The others dissolved the blockade. They

stood against the wall like children again. I felt free to move forward.

Figueroa moved forward with me.

"You're with him?" the leader stepped forward to ask Figueroa.

"He's with me," I said, and the leader permitted us to pass.

Figueroa and I went down the stairs, past Mrs. Fletcher's apartment, and into East 103rd Street. A fire hydrant was pouring water out on at least a hundred children. Most were naked, some wore bathing trunks, the rest had their cotton shorts sticking to their wet bodies. Why weren't the children on the fourth-floor landing rushing naked into the water from the hydrant? Figueroa told me he was certain they were going up for a fix. Maybe just the fifteen-year-old, Figueroa told me, and one of the others, the rest would watch, to learn, like they took turns on the available girls in the neighborhood, watching one another move their white buttocks toward another mystery available to us all.

"I told you the roofs are no good here," Figueroa said. "Two days ago the kids tried to pour a bottle of acid on a cop. They almost killed another cop with beer bottles. When they kill they don't know they're killing, they're just trying to reduce the odds against them. They're in it and they want to get out. That's what they play. And when they play rough, you can be the dead one, not some guy whose name you see in the *Mirror*. That leader was a killer, he might have already had a killing. That's what makes a leader here. He's already personally removed some of the odds. I don't like the punks in East Harlem. I was never one of them. I was too busy getting laid to fool

around with street gangs when I was a kid. But now the neighborhood is funny. You're part of the gang, even if you don't belong. You wouldn't dare go against it, not unless you had a good head start the hell out of here. Families still live in this neighborhood who live in their old apartments, the rent isn't over \$20 or \$30 a month, they won't move or they can't move, and they don't move after sundown, and they have iron gates on all their windows."

"But you like this neighborhood," I said to Figueroa, "you come back. You're staying here now."

"I didn't say where I was staying!" Figueroa stiffened his voice.

"Where are you staying then?"

"Did you close my case?"

"This morning."

"Then where I'm staying is none of your business right now."

"It is my business. You signed a paper stating you were the father of a baby. That means I have to know where you live, how much rent you pay, and how much money you need to stay alive. The rest goes toward the baby."

"And if I don't have a place to stay and if I have no money?"

"Then you have to verify it."

"Everything is proof! Then what proof do I have that that baby is my baby?"

"That you never know."

"I never know! Not just me, but everybody, every guy who has a baby!"

"Everybody," I said.

"It happens in the best of families, that's where that

saying comes from. So a baby never knows if his father is his father?"

"A baby doesn't have to know that detail."

"And if he doesn't have a father?" Figueroa asked.

"Then he needs the next best thing to a father."

"And what's the next best thing to a father?"

"I don't know," I told Figueroa. "Nobody knows. That's what we're trying to find out."

I looked up toward the roof of Mrs. Fletcher's house. The fifteen-year-old was leaning over the parapet. He could have been looking out from Mt. Nebo. For in front of him to the south stretched just about everything the Western world had to offer. And if he lived to be sixty, he would be in the wilderness for more than forty years.

"That's him," Figueroa said, without pointing, "that's the way they lean over the roof practicing bottle dropping. Sometimes they drop shit down from the roofs. Sometimes they feed the pigeons some kind of damn cat food that makes the pigeons dopey and they squeeze the necks of the pigeons. If they get high enough, they tear the heads off the pigeons. But they never get high enough to set fire to these god-damn buildings. They never get high enough to scare the shit out of an agent so that he'll put a coat of paint on the front of these houses. That they don't do. That's why nobody takes these punks seriously. The law stays clear of them except when they have to step in. No cop making six grand a year is going to take on two punks who may make him a corpse in fifteen seconds. That's what Miss Fletcher lived with. Right up on top of her roof. I laid her and now she's out of it. She'll make it with the god-damn kid but I won't. So why don't you just forget about me?"

"Why does the baby make you want to run?"

Figueroa gripped the railing of the stoop.

"I told you to let me be!"

"And I told you that I need some simple answers to simple questions. Where do you live, how much rent are you paying, do you eat in or out, how much money do you make, and where do you work?"

Figueroa let go of the railing. He took out a handkerchief already dirty with soot. He wiped his hands. He put the handkerchief back in his pocket and buttoned the two top buttons of his polished cotton suit.

"You find out!" Figueroa told me.

"I know," I told Figueroa. "I just want you to tell me so that maybe I'll be wrong."

"You think I'm staying with her?" Figueroa pointed to the third floor, back toward the court, back to Mrs. Fletcher's apartment.

"Your tie is there, your cigarettes are there, the extra room is there, and Mrs. Fletcher is there. You won't get your check. You need money to eat and sleep. I seriously doubt if you found a job. Why don't you want to say you're staying there?"

"I was there when you knocked. She got crazy and thought it was her investigator. She was afraid of getting cut off, so I went through the window. But I'm not staying in her bed."

"Then where are you staying?"

"I don't want you coming after me. That's why I moved out of the Chester. I want to be clean. I want to buy back that case record you've got on me. Where do you keep the god-damn things? I want to run. Just run. Like when I was a kid. Before I started getting laid. That's all I did was

run. I'd run clear through Central Park on 96th Street. I ran so fast that two guys offered me a deal on a purse-snatching gang they were going to organize. Now I want to start running again, when I'm almost smart enough to realize that there's no place left for me to run to. But I'm not dead yet and that's one advantage you don't buy twice."

"Tell me about Mrs. Fletcher."

"What?"

"Do you sleep with her?"

"Once in a while."

"Why?"

"Just to get in."

"No other reason?"

"Can you think of one?"

"No, that's why I'm asking you."

"You think there's some deal between me, the mother, and Miss Fletcher?"

"Is there?"

"She doesn't know that I got into the mother."

"What if she did know?"

"It would be just another piece of information added to what she knows that she doesn't want to know."

"Why do you keep seeing the mother?"

"Just to get in."

"Is she so different, say, from that girl you had in the room?"

"That girl in the room? Sleeping with her was like sticking it into a container of milk. I took her back to the Bronx and dropped her. You scared me with her. Seeing that heroin on the floor. That's one reason I moved from the Chester. Just so she wouldn't know where to call me.

She could mean five to ten for me the way she eats the stuff."

"But you see the mother?"

"You know that for sure."

"When did you last sleep with her?"

"Four days ago."

"Why?"

"She asked me to."

"You didn't want to?"

"It's always the first time for a man, you know that. Every time is the first time."

"What does she say?"

"When she takes that housecoat off, nothing. When she's finished, nothing. When she makes coffee, still nothing. With her that's separate, like going to the toilet."

"And you don't talk about Miss Fletcher?"

"Not the way she might want to."

"Does she say anything to you?"

"About Miss Fletcher?"

"About you."

"Nothing." Figueroa unbuttoned the two top buttons of his jacket. He wiped his neck. He showed me the dirt on his handkerchief. "Not even the dirt," Figueroa told me, "she doesn't show me the dirt."

"So you're the pot she sits on."

A fire siren luckily drowned out what I had said. The words didn't get to Figueroa. He leaned forward to hear what I had said but the words were out and gone. The siren drove the soaking children to the sidewalk. The fire truck lumbered through 103rd Street, the firemen adjusting their smoke masks. The firemen don't move in the

Harlem buildings without their smoke masks, buildings designed to go up in flames, the air shafts feeding the fires, the architectural detail of a repentant architect.

"Let's get the hell off this block," Figueroa said, "this block is a god-damn zoo. Do you know the history of this block? They took a census of this block, I don't know who or why. But they found out that this block had more whores, more narcotics, more bastards, more TB's, more alcoholics, more guys making the trip to Lexington, more people flipping than any other block in New York. But then they didn't count all of the blocks in New York the way they did this one. They're afraid to. Nobody would sleep in this town at night. Now the projects are going up. Everybody can take the needle now on foam-rubber cushions. Where will that street take you to?" Figueroa pointed north. "To Yonkers. What goes on past Yonkers? I went away for two weeks to a summer camp past Yonkers. The camp director tried to lay me. The bastard personally examined every kid's balls. He had a passion for locating undescended testicles. What else do you want to know and then I'm taking off."

"Are you working now?"

"No."

"Where do you get money from?"

"I'm hedging now. I'm getting five and ten."

"Where do you live?"

"I'm not staying with Mrs. Fletcher. For that you've got those night cops. They can kick in her door at 5 A.M. and see."

"Then why won't you tell me where you're staying?"

"Because I want to be clean."

"Are you going to give any money to the baby?"

"Now, no."

"Later?"

"I'll see."

"You don't feel you're the father of the baby?"

"I don't feel I'm a father."

"What should you feel to be a father?"

"I don't know from what I know."

"You have my phone number?"

"I have it," Figueroa told me.

"All right, call me when you want to join the human race."

I walked away from Figueroa. I headed for the Fifth Avenue bus. I was tired. Physically tired. The sky was mulled and thick, thick with the soaking humidity that drains New York from June to September. I looked up toward Mrs. Fletcher's apartment on the third floor. I didn't see her apartment because it was stuck in the rear, hung to the air shaft. I did see the fifteen-year-old up on the roof. He had one arm out straight. One arm bent at an angle. I saw the two arms meet. Around him were the group who had blockaded the fourth-floor landing. They stood on the roof like infant gargoyles. The fifteen-year-old was making his quietus with a bare bodkin. I didn't turn to see if Figueroa had been annoyed by what I said. Probably not. I didn't hear him move away from the stoop. He didn't call after me to protest that he was a member of the human race, like the Negro women in Service who shrieked, Can't you see that I'm human, too? Figueroa would probably go up to Mrs. Fletcher's apartment to claim his necktie. If she hadn't made up her mind to strangle him with it. I didn't know what to do with

Figueroa. I wasn't the law. I couldn't have him arrested. I couldn't hold him. I couldn't put a finger on him. I couldn't even call the police for him, now that I had found him. He was free, at least temporarily, to shop for more neckties.

18

Mr. Winna telephoned me at nine, just as the switchboard opened.

"You'd better come out here," Mr. Winna told me, "for that friend of yours, Miss Fletcher. The trouble started with her already. I told you I couldn't see her sitting on those toilets on the fifth floor."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Come out and see. And then I want her out of here. But with no three-day notice, no magistrate courts, just out, she'll be better off and so will I."

"All right, I'll be out," I told Winna. "Did she ask you to call me?"

"She didn't have to ask."

I had two more urgent messages. Mrs. Lugo left a message that Juan Pupa had been shot in the neck by the police and was dying in Bellevue Hospital. I had a message from Zeussa that Patrick Troy on the sixth floor hadn't eaten in three days, that he refused food, and that he refused to go to Metropolitan Hospital. Zeussa said Troy

would die if he didn't get to a hospital. Troy was ninety-three years old and he would die without the assistance of Metropolitan Hospital. Troy refused to be unconscious. And unless he was unconscious, the New York City ambulance drivers couldn't remove him from his room. Zeussa asked me to come out and see Troy and try to convince him to permit himself to be carried out of his room on a stretcher instead of in a canvas bag.

Zeussa telephoned just as Winna hung up.

"Are you coming out for him?" Zeussa asked.

"I can't make him go to a hospital if he doesn't want to."

"How in the hell does he know what he wants! He hasn't eaten in three days. He won't touch the oatmeal we bring up to him. The doctor talked himself blue in the face. Troy doesn't say a word, just that he won't go to the hospital. But he's got to go. He's dying. Maybe the hospital can give him a pill that will keep him alive another ten months."

Mrs. Lugo telephoned me just as Zeussa hung up. I heard the operator urging Mrs. Lugo to deposit another five cents.

"I want to go to Lexington, Kentucky!" Mrs. Lugo told me. "Can you do it for me?"

"What's happening to Pupa?"

"He will be dead."

"All right, come in to see me on Wednesday."

"The babies will go to a Catholic home?"

"The babies will go to a Catholic home."

"And the babies will be mine?"

"The babies are yours. What happened to Pupa? How did he get shot?"

"He was selling some dope to a man on Amsterdam

Avenue. The man was a policeman, a detective. He told Juan that he was arrested. Juan started to run and the detective shot him in the neck. They give him blood but he has no life. His brother's family will bury him when he dies. I have no money."

"All right, come in on Wednesday."

Mrs. Lugo hung up just as the operator started asking again for an additional nickel.

I quickly telephoned my one clean landlord on West 87th Street, to get a room ready for Miss Fletcher. He told me that the promised vacancy hadn't come up. "But there's a possibility," he told me, "a tenant on the third floor just went to St. Luke's Hospital with a bleeding ulcer. Maybe they'll keep him in the hospital."

I went across the great soft wooden floor to see Ostrovsky. Ostrovsky's desk was covered with housing forms.

"Look," Ostrovsky told me, "forms but no vacancies. I don't know why we don't start moving our clients into the middle-income projects instead of holding them down the ladder on the low-income projects. They make more money than we do. Do you know that the low-income people in the middle-income group can't pay the middle-income rent, and the middle-income people wouldn't live in the middle-income projects and they don't make enough to go into a Title I or Title II or whatever the hell it's called? What they need to do is to move our clients from the low-income projects into the middle-income projects and let the people who can't pay the middle-income rent move into the low-income projects. Do you know that the rooms are bigger in the low-income projects? And they've started putting toilet seats on the toilets. And I think next year they're going to put closet doors on the closets. We're

moving ahead. They're even going to have urinals in the elevators for the kids who can't wait. Now what can I do for you?" Ostrovsky asked me. "First tell me where to put this charming family." Ostrovsky showed me a housing card with eight names on it. "They're in one room on West 102nd Street. And in twenty minutes the marshal is going to lead them out of 1,296 cubic feet of air onto the sidewalk. And in thirty-five minutes the seven kids are going to be running around the Service floor. I have to rehouse them. That's my responsibility at this moment in the twentieth century. Do you know what I have for them? The usual. Three connecting hotel rooms at the modest rental of \$58 a week."

I went back to my desk and Jackson told me that Miss Fletcher called.

"She has an awfully sweet voice to be a client," Jackson told me.

I didn't return Miss Fletcher's call, but left the office and walked to Central Park West.

The sun gave no quarter. Take it or leave it. The humidity still clung to your skin. I walked in the shadow of the railroad-flat buildings. But it didn't help. The air was thick and wet and heavy with soot. The windows were flung open on all of the buildings. But no breeze blew. I could see the Rockefeller church in between the side streets. Grant's Tomb also rose above the Harlem streets, with its dome that never soared. There are no monuments in New York City, only the bodies of living men. The sidewalks were filled with hundreds and hundreds of bodies. The children ran gratefully into the mouths of the open fire hydrants. The men stood like cattle at a freight junction. The women followed my black notebook and they

looked to see what doorway I would enter and some turned from me, as though I was going to ask them the eternal question: When did you last see John Williams?

Winna was waiting for me in his cubbyhole. He had an open container of creamed cottage cheese on his desk, a chunk of rye bread, and a dried-out smoked whitefish.

"Breakfast," Winna told me. He offered me some whitefish but the fish looked too dead to be eaten.

"What happened?" I asked Winna.

"Go upstairs and see. The elevator is working. I had an inspector out here yesterday. He gave the elevator a clean bill."

I entered the elevator with a faith I wish I could apply to matters more important than getting to the fifth floor.

The girl who sold her baby for \$500 pulled open the elevator door on the fifth floor.

"Jesus," she told me, "get that girl out of here. Put her on the next rocket to the moon or get her a needle."

I passed the fifth-floor hallway toilet that Winna always mentioned. It was foul. The bathtub was caked with fallen plaster. The ceilings and walls were broken through to the plasterboard. The shower head was pulled out of the wall. The tile was shattered on the floor. The toilet bowl wouldn't have been used by any other animal but man. And it had to be used, there was no other flushing toilet bowl on the fifth floor.

Miss Fletcher's room was at the end of the corridor, facing the street. When she opened the door the sun burst on her purple bruised face. Her hand went to her face. She looked ashamed of what had happened to her.

The room still smelled of Clorox. I sat down by the window. The pipes under the sink had been sprayed with a

green clinging poison, the same poison an exterminator used in Patrick Troy's room. The exterminator poked the snout of his spray gun toward the sink and sprayed a trench around the sink. The roaches tumbled dead out of the walls and the pipes. They seemed to come swarming out of the wall anxious to die. Why don't they run in the opposite direction, I asked the exterminator. This is a new poison they don't know about, he told me. The roaches lay piled up in the sink. And Patrick Troy told me, that's where I get my three glasses of water a day from. In the room where Patrick Troy lay dying the roaches crawled over his bed as though he were the stiff leg of a kitchen table.

"What happened?" I asked Miss Fletcher.

"Figueroa was here last night."

"Why did he beat you?"

"He told me he wanted the baby."

"What the hell does he want with the baby?"

"He said the baby is his, not mine."

"He was acting for something. What else did he say?"

"He went through my purse and took Ellen's birth certificate."

"I can get you another one."

"He told me to leave him alone. He told me to tell you to leave him alone. I told him that he was responsible for the baby, not for me. That's what got him excited. He picked up the baby and said he would take her then."

"That's when the fight started?"

"No, because I didn't let him get to the baby. He started to hit me when I told him the baby wouldn't even know where his grave was. That seemed to frighten him. He got wild and started punching me. It wasn't the first time

he had hit me and I knew how far he would go. But he seemed to forget. The girl next door pulled him off of me. The one who's on narcotics. She keeps a bottle of acid in her purse. She told Figueroa she would blind him. That quieted him down."

"And the baby?"

"She slept."

"When did Figueroa leave?"

"About 11:30."

"He wasn't on narcotics?"

"I don't think so."

"What did he really want?" I asked.

Miss Fletcher gave a short moan, sudden, abrupt, like an infant disturbed in its sleep. But unlike an infant, she couldn't sink back into sleep. She brushed her bruised face. She looked to see if her baby still slept. She looked quickly at the sink to see if the faucet was turned off. She looked at as much of herself as she could see, the line of her breasts pushed out from her nylon housecoat, her feet in brown loafers, her hands that looked for something to grasp, and I could see by her face that she knew what her own face looked like.

"Why should we always be so frightened? Why can't we tell ourselves what we ought to hear? Why is it? Is everybody this way or just the people who are frightened?"

"We all tremble. Just as we all sleep. How did Figueroa make you tremble?"

Miss Fletcher looked quickly toward the bed, as though I ought to guess what she wanted to tell me without the permanence of words. The bed had a green spread. Mr. Winna's spread. Winna bought his linen at auction sales. Great bundles of washed-out linen, towels, draperies, pil-

lows, bed sheets. And each tenant had to deposit five dollars with him for the linen.

"He came into the room just as I was nursing Ellen. He wouldn't even let Ellen finish. He went at me. He wanted me in bed. I told him no. I told him not to touch me when I was nursing Ellen. But he came in like he had a plan. I just guessed. But I think he wanted to get into me just to make me pregnant. That's what I felt from him. And I wouldn't let him come near me. There was something happening and I didn't know what it was. That's what made me tremble. But I knew I couldn't let him get into me. I knew if he did I would be pregnant. And if that happened, it would be like you said, there would be just the checks coming in and nothing else."

"What do you want to do now?"

"I want to get out of here!"

"You didn't find a room?"

"I went to that house on 87th Street you told me about. They told me that they were sorry but they didn't have a vacant room. The house was clean. The mailboxes were polished, they were private."

"You didn't see anything else?"

"Nothing that I could move into again."

"I saw Figueroa's mother on 105th Street. She said that you could have her apartment. She said that would be the least she could do for you and the baby. Do you know her apartment?"

"I couldn't take her apartment."

"Why not?"

"She paid \$500 for those two rooms. She got the money when her sister died. She can't live anywhere else on the money she makes. She has to have those rooms to stay

alive. She needs to eat well and to be clean with her tuberculosis. You can't eat and be clean in the furnished room she'd have to take. She figured that all out when she paid \$500 for the apartment. I can't take her place." Miss Fletcher looked toward the crib and I saw that the legs of the crib had been sprayed with a green roach powder. "Her tuberculosis might be alive. The germs might come for Ellen. I don't want that to happen to her. I started to look for an apartment yesterday and Ellen started to cough and I took her across the park to Mt. Sinai to see if Figueroa gave her TB. They're going to give Ellen some tests. You need the sun if you have TB. I never knew so many people have TB. All the men in this house have it. They say it's arrested. But they drink wine all day. How can they drink and live with TB?"

Miss Fletcher went over to the window. She pushed up the window.

"When I put my head out of the window I see the Park."

"You can't stay here. How in the hell do you sit on that toilet?"

"I don't look at the toilet."

"But you have to bathe."

"I sponge bathe the way I did in East Harlem."

"You have to sit on the toilet."

"I don't use that one."

"What toilet do you use?"

"I'll move!"

It happens. The room shuts out the outside. You forget there's a Fifth Avenue, a St. Patrick's Cathedral, Rockefeller Center, even Macy's. The furnished rooms in New York contain more penitents than the mud villages of

India. Miss Crawford in the next building on Central Park West used to work in a gallery. She had a love affair with a girl who was a drunk. The girl went to sleep with a cigarette and burned to death. Miss Crawford came home when the girl was on fire. She collapsed. She started on wine. She moved into a room eight by ten feet. The room was piled with old newspapers, dirty underwear, and stacks of wine bottles. Miss Crawford drank sherry with a tubercular who was down to ninety-three pounds. The tubercular was homosexual. He spent three years at Seaview. He used to be a dental technician before he got on the budget. He and Miss Crawford sat and drank in her room and they stumbled about the room and in the hallways and I don't think they had eaten meat and potatoes in a year. Why don't you move, I always used to ask Miss Crawford, and she would say, I'll look, I'll look, but she never looked further than her girl friend burning to death.

"You don't think I'm going to move?" Miss Fletcher asked, almost as an admission.

"I would run if I were you."

I got up from the one chair Mr. Winna provided for the room and went to the door. A roach puffed with eggs almost crawled over my hand. The roaches don't scurry in the furnished rooms, not the way they scurry in bright white apartment kitchens. I left the room. I didn't want Miss Fletcher to accommodate herself to the room. Not like the roaches. Not like the generations I knew in Harlem. The exterminator told me the roaches built up a hard crust to his poisons. Their backs were stiff. When you stepped on them now they cracked. His firm had to step up their poisons. Each powder they come up with, the ex-

terminator told me, the roaches know about. It's as though they've got a whole spy setup and they go into training for the latest BXZ.

I went out into the hallway, down the four flights to Mr. Winna's cubicle. Mr. Winna had eaten the smoked whitefish. He was sucking on the head of the fish when I walked into his cubicle.

"Is she moving?" Winna asked.

"She still hasn't found a place."

"Can't you find anything for her?"

"I want her to find it."

"Will she?"

"I'll know today. What about Figueroa?"

"He came here last night. I heard he tried to beat her up and take the kid."

"Did the police come?"

"Nobody called the police."

"Are you going to give her a three-day notice?"

"If you say she'll move, I'll wait for her to move. But I wouldn't wait for that Figueroa to get to her again. I think he'll kill her."

"Why? There's nothing in the record to say so."

"He's quiet, serious, unfortunately he listens to himself a lot. And if he gives himself the word, the girl will be dead. I've known eleven murderers, Mr. Phillips. How many do you know?"

I knew four but that didn't include my family of landlords. Lucille on West 105th Street killed her third baby. Esther on West 94th Street killed her father with a kitchen knife when he got into her bed while her mother was at Mt. Sinai Hospital having a baby. Leroy killed his wife by shoving her out of a building on West 84th Street. Fergu-

son killed his mother on 87th Street and stuck her head-first into a toilet bowl.

I left Winna to his whitefish. I walked up West 105th Street where the victims sat waiting for the death cart. The stoops on West 105th Street hold the men out of Seaview Hospital with arrested tuberculosis. I nodded hello to Lester Grant, George Williams, James Austin, William Nelson, and Jowitt Lewis. They sat on the stoop soaking up the humid sun and the bottles of wine they passed from mouth to mouth. The tubercular is given extraordinary consideration in New York City. He is permitted to go to the head of the long lines in Service. And a special diet dividend is given amounting to \$5.00 semimonthly and the men who can't cook get \$19.70 semimonthly added to their food allowance if they are 10 per cent underweight, otherwise they get \$15. The tubercular also gets the privilege of being referred to Jowitt's building. The building has five floors, each floor has twenty rooms and two toilets. The toilets make Winna's toilets look dazzling. One hundred separate families live in the hundred rooms. Every other room has children, from one child just born into the world out of our secret hatching places to more than one child, two, three, and if the building inspector doesn't come or if he turns his eyes toward his own denuded salary check, four children. The roaches in Jowitt's building have already began the first step toward the insect domination of the world. The slow stately contempt with which they move over the children and the sleeping tubercular drunks would chill even the housing authorities. And the rats chew on the faces of the drunks and the sleeping children as though the flesh of the face is a rare imported delicacy.

I told Miss Fletcher to run.

Jowitt Lewis rushed up to me from the stoop. "Mr. Phillips, Mr. Phillips, Mr. Phillips," he repeated. He put his hand on my shoulder. His mouth stunk from the wine. Jowitt Lewis was forty-three years old. His face was covered with long knife wounds. His wrists had two circular red lines where he had tried to soak himself in blood but Metropolitan Hospital saved him. He had two children somewhere. "Mr. Phillips," he told me, "look at this," and he held up his arm and showed me the teeth marks. "Do you think they can eat me up without my knowing it, Jesus say no."

Lewis didn't wait to hear what I could say or what specialized knowledge I had of the eating habits of rats. He went back to sit in again with the choir on the stoop. The men had to conduct their own wake while they were living, because there was no one to mourn for them when they died.

Zeussa came rushing up to me in the lobby of the Chester. He had a container in his hand that he gave to me.

"Take this oatmeal up to him! I don't want a man to die of starvation in my house."

"Did a doctor see him today?" I asked Zeussa.

"I paid five dollars out of my pocket to have a doctor from West End Avenue look at him. He said the same thing. Your Mr. Troy has to go to the hospital."

"You know I can't force him to go."

"You can try. These people listen to you first. You're the poppa, Phillips, you have the money, you pay their bills, they listen to you. Talk to him." Zeussa pressed the oatmeal in my hand. The container felt warm.

I showed Zeussa form M62 that I took out of my black

notebook. The form said that Patrick Troy was advised that he required hospitalization and he had refused hospitalization and no one was further responsible for his well-being, at least no one on this earth.

"What the hell do I need with this form?" Zeussa told me. "I want the man to die in the hospital. He can't read it. He can't hear any more. He doesn't know what you're talking about. He's alive, like my niece's baby that's two months old!"

I took the elevator to the sixth floor. Troy's door was open and I walked in. He lay propped up in bed, his long legs uncovered, and he supported himself by clutching to the soiled bed sheet. I sat down on the chair next to his bed. The night table held three containers of oatmeal. The room was familiar to me. I could see nothing had been disturbed, not even the dirt. Troy had an old L.C. Smith standard typewriter, a canvas suitcase, a silver hairbrush, a Big Ben alarm clock, two hats, one a new soft gray, the other a dirty crushed brown felt, he had unwashed cups and saucers, plates on his big table, his clothes hung over the rush chair, his papers were shoved under the bed in cartons that had held cans of Carnation evaporated milk.

"I was born in Ohio," Troy said when I sat down. "I went to Los Angeles, I went to Salt Lake City. I even saw Oregon. I touched land on Alaska but didn't go any further. The only State I didn't get to was Maine. I put my feet on forty-seven States. That's something to do." Troy pointed to the sink for water.

The sink was crusted with filth. The glass had an oily covering of dirt. I managed to get the glass clean and I brought Troy a glass of water. He wouldn't let me hold

the glass for him. He insisted on taking the glass and holding it in his hands that he tried to keep from shaking.

"You don't want me to go to the hospital?" Troy asked.

"You do exactly what you want to do," I said to Troy.

"Hospitals are for sick people. I'm not sick. I never went to a hospital except in Nebraska."

Troy asked for more water. I held up the container of oatmeal but he asked for the water. He held the glass again. He asked me to prop him up against the headboard. His skin felt like cold toast.

"The doctor said you should go."

"I don't think there was a hospital in Wyoming when I was there. Ohio had a lot of hospitals. Hospitals and colleges. I don't think there's a town in Ohio without a college. It's something to live as long as I have." But what the something was Troy didn't say.

Zeussa came into the room.

"Is he going?" Zeussa asked.

"He doesn't want to."

"He's got to go!"

"You ask him."

I moved away from the chair.

Zeussa sat down. He picked up the container of oatmeal. Troy turned away from the oatmeal.

"In Ohio," Troy said, "I had an ingrown toenail. No doctor looked at me after that."

"They'll take care of you in the hospital," Zeussa said.

"I don't need care."

"What do you need?" Zeussa asked.

"I need to take a pee." Troy motioned to me to help him out of bed. I started to lift him out of the bed and Troy fell back against the pillow.

"I'll wait," he said. "Let me wait." The bed wasn't soiled with urine. Troy must have dragged himself out of bed during the past two days to use the sink for a urinal.

"Let Mr. Phillips call an ambulance for you," Zeussa said. "The nurses will take good care of you. You can sit up on the roof. All the hospitals have television now."

Troy turned to me.

"Will you pay the rent on the room if I go?" Troy asked me.

"Yes," I said.

'And everything stays here. Nothing is touched. You lock the door and this is still mine?'

"It's still yours," I told Troy.

"You heard that?" Troy said to Zeussa. Zeussa nodded. "All right, I'll go to the hospital," Troy said.

I went into the hallway and dialed the police for an ambulance. In fifteen minutes two policemen came into the room. The older policeman, heavy and in his fifties, almost wept when he saw Troy propped up in bed.

"Kansas," Troy said to the officer, "that's where my last relative died."

The officer picked up Troy's pants and shirt from the chair and brought them over to the bed. Troy refused to be helped and insisted on putting on his pants alone. When he stood up you could see that he had once been six feet tall. Troy got into his pants and picked up the pillow and fumbled under the sheet until he found his wallet. He put the wallet into his pants. The officer handed Troy a necktie. Troy tied the knot and slipped on his vest and jacket. When he had finished dressing the ambulance drivers arrived. The ambulance drivers wanted Troy to

sit in a chair and be carried out. Troy refused to be carried. He walked to the door and then stopped.

'have to pee," he said. The officer looked around for a toilet. Troy pointed to the sink. Troy walked back to the sink. The officer pulled down the window shade. Troy unbuttoned his pants. The officer went to help Troy stand at the sink. Troy motioned the officer back. Troy stood alone at the sink and emptied himself. When he finished buttoning his pants, he smiled triumphantly at the officer. Troy walked back again to the door, he walked down the long green hallway to the elevator, he stood unsupported in the elevator, and when he came to the lobby floor he permitted himself to be laid out in the stretcher. The ambulance drivers wrapped Troy up in two blankets. Troy had nothing left to do except close his eyes and join Juan Pupa who lay dying in Bellevue Hospital.

Zeussa turned to me and said, "I still don't believe it's going to happen to me!"

"Neither do I," I told Zeussa, "but who can we complain to when it happens?"

I walked out of the Chester, down West 106th Street, to see if Miss Fletcher had fled Winna's building.

19 Miss Fletcher was gone. Not as distant as Pupa and Troy. She had run from Winna's building. But to where I didn't know. Winna told me she took her crib and clothing in a cab and didn't leave a forwarding address. "She didn't wave goodbye," Winna told me, "and her room is already rented to a girl with two babies who smelled the Clorox and asked me what's that? How can they come into a room and just start to live? And your office sent them, Mr. Ostrovsky called. That I don't understand. But I don't want to. I still have a mortgage bigger than my good wishes." I left Winna in his cubicle. He was finding his peace with a bottle of Pepsi-Cola and two jelly doughnuts.

Central Park West looked as cruel as a bull-whip. I walked from Winna's building to West 93rd Street, looking down the side streets, streets waiting for the wreckers, past the great projects, the buildings set on top of the ground like building blocks instead of rising out of the land, I half expected to see Miss Fletcher wheeling her baby in

the carriage she had bought with a 661 supplementary check.

I didn't see Miss Fletcher and I had nine statutory visits to complete before the end of August to meet the requirements of the city, State, and Federal governments. I went to my building on West 93rd Street. I always entered the house on West 93rd Street as though I had finally managed to sink physically in the ooze. The babies looked like worms. A great mirror in the lobby reflected the black leather jackets and engineer boots of the boys who had suddenly become men. The women were bloated from pregnancies. The men who had irrevocably lost their status as boys took heroin like aspirin. The doors to the rooms were all open and you felt that no one lived in one particular room, like fish swarming.

I went to see Angelo Gomerra first and he sat on the edge of his bed and told me he couldn't find a job and he pulled out his NYSES card as though it were a talisman. Angelo had a wife, a son, and a baby preparing himself for entry into the world by watching through his mother's eyes his father rolling up his sleeve and sticking needles into his arm. Mrs. Soto in Room 9 told me that she heard Pedro was in Rikers Island for beating up a transit policeman. Pedro was the father of her four children. Mrs. Evans in Room 10 told me that her son William kicked in the door to her room and tried to strangle her and she called the police and they took him to Bellevue and Bellevue sent him to Rockland State Hospital and he had sent word from Rockland State that he was going to rip her throat open. Mrs. Cruz in Room 12 told me that she had no knowledge of the present whereabouts of Luis Colon and when I pointed to her swelling belly, she said,

a man I don't know, he came into the room. Mrs. Candelaria lay in her bed with all the windows shut and she told me she had five clinic visits scheduled with St. Luke's and St. Luke's was going to operate on her intestines. Miss Rodriguez in Room 18 had her three children sleeping naked in a single bed, the floor had puddles of urine. Take the children into the park, I told her, wash the floor, and she smiled and said, I don't know where Juan Ramos is, I think he is in Rikers Island. Miss Cortez in Room 19 had a brand-new Zenith television set. Where did you get the set, I asked. A friend gave it to me. What friend? I don't remember his name now, it was a friend of a friend. Where does he live? I can find out, all right? Miss Cortez used heroin. She had spent three years in Bedford Prison. She was supposed to be looking for a job. But she told me that whenever she found a job she had to run to the ladies' toilet because her bladder became weak. Miss Williams in Room 21 had two psychiatric examinations because she had threatened to kill the landlord, her mother, and her two babies. The psychiatrist said she was not insane, that she was legally responsible for her actions, that she was depressive, had an arrested personality, and that no treatment was possible for her, no pills, no shock, not even aspirin. Mr. Lopez in Room 22 had lived thirty-one years with Maria Reyes and she threw him out of the house and he spent his days going back and forth from his room to St. Luke's Hospital and fumbling for his clinic card whenever I came to see him.

I sat at my desk and looked at the great globs of white lights. The file cabinets were as silent as the bottom of the sea. The green cabinets leaden to the floor. I watched the workers go to the cabinets and extract the cases, the

bulging records that fed on a diet of letterheads. I listened to Mrs. Owens yelling into the telephone, "We won't pay \$140 rent a month. I don't care if you moved in. Move out!" I listened for my phone to ring. I wanted to know where Miss Fletcher had moved. Winna told me again that Miss Fletcher didn't leave a forwarding address. And Winna also told me that he returned a week's rent to her. Maybe she joined Figueroa," Winna said, "the baby is still young enough for her to think of him as the father."

I went to Bronson figuring out a budget for a family of ten persons and the total came to over \$200 semi-monthly.

"What's a father?" I asked Bronson.

"What the hell am I doing here?" Bronson asked me. "Look at this budget. Two hundred dollars semimonthly, which is \$62 more than I take home. That's my increment for eight years. They don't pay me for every additional baby that I have. Why should they pay this cat?"

"She doesn't have a father," I said.

"She's better off than with a father! She takes home \$200 semimonthly, \$400 a month, \$4,800 a year, with no taxes taken out, all her clothing bills paid, all her medical expenses paid, and she can get an ambulance any damn time she feels like picking up the telephone! What the hell does she need with a father?"

"What about the kids?"

"The kids are all right. They've got their colleges all picked out already. Rockland State, Pilgrim State, Bellevue, Rikers Island, Sing Sing."

"What's a father?" I asked Bronson again.

"He doesn't exist, period. The god-damn pediatrician is your father now. He's the father, grandfather, grand-

mother, and mother, and he acts like he's getting paid for being all four. Phillips, we're not living now, none of us, we're just waiting to see what's going to happen!"

The phone rang and I hurried on the first ring.

It was Miss Pearson in Service. "There's a Fletcher waiting down here to see you."

"Tell her I'll be down."

I sat back in my swivel chair, having long ago made up my mind that when I left this job, I would take the swivel chair with me, for on the chair, like a pope's throne, I had made ten thousand decisions, all of them accountable, not to the city, State, and Federal governments, but to myself. I sat back in my swivel chair and looked out on the windows of the great churches in Harlem that should have long ago completed the job I was doing. But the church's duty is to fail. I didn't feel it was my job to fail. Miss Fletcher wanted to find her father. And if my friend Herman Melville could search for a white whale, I could search for a father. Mr. Fletcher was dead. And I had the verification on my desk Figueroa was dead as a man. Miss Fletcher couldn't consider me as a father. Who then could be a father?

It would be easy to say this roaring twentieth century we live in. But the century seems more intent on hunting down each one of us as though we had been set free in a November field to run for our lives. I turned to Mrs. Owens buried in the case records heaped on her desk. Her work was never done, like the New York sewers. Mrs. Owens saw me looking at her and she turned from the records to ask me, "Do you think He's watching us every minute to make sure that we never do anything right?"

The bells of a church built to house a great faith and

now host to one of the lesser faiths began to ring out and announce with grandeur that it was once more twelve o'clock.

"I'm going to lunch," Mrs. Owens announced. And I got up to go down into Service to see Miss Fletcher.

The tolling of the bells accompanied me past Ostrovsky's desk. I heard him shouting into the phone, "But the law says an extra baby is an extra person and you can't chop the baby in half!" The law had finally gotten around to limiting the number of babies who should be squeezed into a furnished room. The law still didn't get around to keeping babies out of the rooms. But it would happen. We believe finally in the law.

I stopped at the administration bulletin board that always reminded me of bleak mornings in the army. Except the extraordinary October morning when I read my name had been selected for discharge, and I was free once again to continue my limited journey, but when I read my name then there were no limitations, only those resounding earth chords, that all of us hear and only a few can quietly and finally say hosanna. The bulletin board on the great soft wooden floor lit by the globs of white lights announced a lecture series on alcoholism, a round table on juvenile delinquency by an even dozen morally delinquent adults. We still believe in public exhortation. And what we believe in private no one dares say.

I realized I was avoiding the stairway and instead making a journey around the wooden floor, walking past the units clustered together like bunkers, past the file cabinets that were monuments to our failure.

The tolling of the twelve o'clock bells, the death of Patrick Troy that was announced to me at 9:45 A.M., the

death of Juan Pupa that I learned from Mrs. Lugo at 10 A.M. from a pay telephone at Bellevue Hospital, with Mrs. Lugo crying into the telephone, "I want to go to Lexington, Kentucky!" made me quickly cry that Miss Fletcher had not yet stopped running from Winna's building. That she would flee from the West Side buildings like a gazelle. That she would run out of New York toward a field of dandelions. That she would get to the dandelions. That she would make the great leap, that her feet would touch the dandelions, and her baby would reach for a buttercup.

Bronson waved to me, pointing to the telephone in our unit.

Mrs. Reade was on the phone. She apologized for telephoning me and then told me she had fallen in a faint in her room and she didn't have the strength to crawl to the door to cry for help, that she had fallen when it was light and she awoke on the floor in the dusk, and she thought she was already dead. She told me to put her into a nursing home, now, before November. I left the awesome telephone and went down the stairway to see where Miss Fletcher had fled.

I heard the rumble in Service. I pushed against the elevator doors and walked in on the peeling gray paint, the two great windows, the brilliant sunlight, the faces waiting for the appearance of their father.

"Mr. Phillips!"

I turned, surprised and worried, to see Mrs. Fletcher coming toward me, alone. I looked for Miss Fletcher but I didn't see her, nor did I see the daughter in Mrs. Fletcher. Not in Mrs. Fletcher's body that now looked sodden in the heat. Mrs. Fletcher saw my eyes go toward her stomach.

She pressed her hands to her hips, pulling her stomach taut.

We went to an empty desk by the wall with the peeling gray paint. I would have preferred to sit by the two great windows with the still brilliant sun but the table was taken by a family that sat over their suitcases. Ostrovsky had another family to house.

"This happens each day?" Mrs. Fletcher asked.

"Everyday," I said.

"Don't we get any free days, all of us at once, like school letting out?"

I couldn't avoid the question.

"Where's Kenny?" I asked.

"She's home in bed," Mrs. Fletcher said, but flatly, that worried me, like a vague threat that quickly becomes marshaled, sinking into our bones like strontium, a threat we can't touch nor protest when begun. "In bed," Mrs. Fletcher said again, flatly, "her bed, she and the baby, she came with the baby at six o'clock last night, she said she couldn't find a room, that she couldn't start to live in any of them, that she had to try to start from where she had started from in the first place. We talked all night, she wanted to know about her father. Was he living, was he dead? Could she find him? Was he living in Cleveland, in Chicago, in Albany? Questions like she asked when she was a baby. Where did she come from? Where did a cow come from? What was the moon? Who made the rain? Questions I could never answer. And then she started on Figueroa. And I couldn't even say his name without my blood running out of me."

Mrs. Fletcher looked into the room where two Puerto Rican babies played on the floor, waiting for placement.

The bleak cot without a sheet. The two babies pulled on a clattering turtle.

"Why do babies love lollypops?" Mrs. Fletcher suddenly asked. "Who tells them to love lollypops? Who tells a baby to smile?" Mrs. Fletcher stiffened herself, rising out of her chair, pressing her hands against her belly. "You looked at my stomach! The baby is gone! I pulled it out last night. Just before Kenny came in! The baby went down the toilet where it would have gone anyway. She saw it. She saw the mess. It was Figueroa's baby! He made it spitting and puffing on me when I had him wrapped around me. You don't know him. I could have broken his back with my feet when I had him on top of me."

Mrs. Fletcher bent toward me.

"He's not a man! He didn't put the baby inside of me! That wasn't done by him! Do you know what happened to him? The police found him in the Bronx with a fifteen-year-old girl. The police found heroin in her room and Figueroa in the room. They have him on drugs. He wasn't using the drugs but he'll never be able to prove it."

Mrs. Fletcher looked at the two Puerto Rican babies, the bare cot, the clattering turtle.

"Where's their mother?" she cried out. "There's no mother with them!"

And the thunder broke on her face. She turned her face to the wall of the gray peeling paint.

Mrs. Fletcher wept against the wall, pressing her face up against the wall so that her cries couldn't be heard. She dug her fingernails into the paint. Mrs. Fletcher scratched her nails down the wall.

"I'm bleeding," Mrs. Fletcher told me, "it's coming out of me."

I looked down on the floor and saw the blood under Mrs. Fletcher's feet. The blood was running down her legs. I pulled Mrs. Fletcher to the cot.

"Don't stop the bleeding!" Mrs. Fletcher told me. "Let it all run out of me!"

The cot was soaked with blood.

"It has to all come out!"

"Press your legs together!" I told Mrs. Fletcher.

"I've got to die! I can't carry the blood any more. I can't keep it in me. I've got to spill it out. I don't want this blood in me!"

I heard the siren and saw two patrolmen hurry toward us and behind them the ambulance drivers I had called. The police always accompanied a call for an ambulance.

"Jesus," one of the patrolmen said, taking out his black notebook. "How long has this been going on?" He had slipped on the blood and he scraped his shoe on the floor to wipe the blood off.

"What's her name?" the patrolman asked.

I answered the questions for the record.

"Any relatives?" the patrolman asked.

"A daughter," I said.

"Where is she?"

I looked toward Mrs. Fletcher, to let her tell what she knew.

"Dead," Mrs. Fletcher said.

Dead.

I couldn't now grasp what Mrs. Fletcher had said. I didn't know what to do with the word.

"Dead!" the patrolman repeated.

"Dead," Mrs. Fletcher repeated.

"How long?" the officer asked.

"Two hours."

The patrolman looked from Mrs. Fletcher to me.

"What the hell's going on here? Where's she dead?"

"In her bed. From me. I killed the two babies!"

Mrs. Fletcher turned her face from the officer. She pressed her hands to her stomach so that the blood would rush out of her.

I had no blood in me. I was as cold as the wind that howled in all of the flappings of my body. I couldn't bring my hands together. They didn't want to know one another. My head seemed flung against the wall. I could feel all of the tens of thousands of notions in my head beginning to run to my defense like an army called out from its sleep. I shook off the army. I didn't want a defense. I only wanted to see the world once collapse because someone had died, like a table with its legs kicked away. It's easy enough to get a new set of legs. But let the table once collapse.

I walked out of the room to look at the strange phenomena of the people seated on the wooden benches and the telephone ringing and the mouths opening and closing in our servitude.

I heard the patrolman come up to me and say, "We can't get anything sensible out of her. Let's go down to the house. We'll need you for identification. I called homicide and they'll be waiting for us."

We hurried out of Service, down the cold stone steps, into the prowl car with its red light circling and pulled away from the curb toward East Harlem. The driver whirled through the streets past the cars that pulled aside for us and he used the siren to get past a jam up on East 116th Street and the cars opened for us so that we could plunge further into the streets. The rushing siren sounded

in my ears like a requiem for Miss Fletcher, closed over my ears like the conch shell Figueroa told me about, the sounds in the sky we can't hear, the dizzy flaps into the cold spaces of sky, but still contained in the conch shell and certainly contained in us or how else would we know about it. The prowler car pulled up to Mrs. Fletcher's house on East 103rd Street and I stepped out of the car as though I was touching a land that might open under my feet. We went up the stoop where I last saw Figueroa, under the parapet where the fifteen-year-old stuck a needle in his right arm in the late afternoon, that made the two officers unlimber their guns, the guns slapped against their thighs, we went past the landing where the children stood in a half circle like the teeth of a shark, and stopped in front of Mrs. Fletcher's door.

The door was ajar. The room quiet. The kitchen was empty. The police lock pushed back. The kitchen light was on. I saw three strips of bacon in a frying pan. The kitchen table had two cups of coffee, one spilled, and a plate of toast soaking in the spilled coffee.

"In her room," I said, and the two policemen and detectives followed me, the room quiet except for the stomping of our feet, because we were listening to hear if the baby was alive.

The door was closed to the room where Figueroa had left his striped rep tie. Where Miss Fletcher had returned to start from. I saw the crib standing upright in the kitchen, still not put together. We heard no sound.

"All right, let's go in," said one of the detectives, the heavy one, out of breath from the climb, he tried the door and when it stuck, he pushed against the door and we entered the room.

I saw the baby on the bed and Miss Fletcher's hand on the baby and when I pushed the light switch the baby yelled and I almost screamed.

The police rushed to the bed. I took the baby. And when Miss Fletcher's hand fell away from her baby, I knew she was dead.

The baby was wet and I was wet. The baby yelled for its milk and when the police turned Miss Fletcher we saw a kitchen knife buried in her side. Her yellow cotton blouse was open, the blouse she had worn in Central Park, the blouse was open and we could see her breasts, the breasts I had seen when they were miraculously alive, and it looked as though she had been trying to give milk to the baby. I remembered how she lifted her breast out of her brassiere, offering her breast to the baby, and now her breast was out of her brassiere, and now out of her, the breast now had no function other than to rot.

I undid the baby's rubber pants and reached for a diaper on the maple chest and diapered the baby on the kitchen table. There was a quart container of milk on the stove. I rinsed a pyrex bottle and filled the bottle with the pasteurized milk. The police went about their work, saying that Mrs. Fletcher was right in what she said, she had killed her daughter, she had stuck a knife in her, but why she killed her they didn't speculate, except to say the knife was in Kenny waist high and Mrs. Fletcher had probably grabbed the knife off the kitchen table and swung.

I took the baby wrapped in a cotton sheet for placement midtown, crying without knowing why, I took the baby down the two flights, past the stoop where Figueroa had buttoned the two top buttons of his polished cotton suit,

past the fire hydrant where the children roariouly baptized themselves, up to the corner of East 103rd Street that stood waiting for the bulldozers, I caught a taxi, I rode down Lexington Avenue, past the buildings that must look extraordinarily ugly to whoever bothers to look, we rode fast, and the baby yelled, and I felt like yelling at the top of my voice with the baby. But I knew the baby wouldn't hear my yelling. And nobody else would listen. And so I said to the baby, Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man! bake me a cake as fast as you can, roll it and pat it, and mark it with B, and put it in the oven, for baby and me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julius Horwitz has neither been overwhelmed by New York nor has he gushed forth its statistical superiority. New York City for Mr. Horwitz has become the vantage point for him to view the one and the many, and the city for Mr. Horwitz is as small and as universal as was Mr. Thoreau's pond to Mr. Thoreau—and as the city is, in fact, to all of its inhabitants. Mr. Horwitz's first book, *The City*, published in 1953, was characterized by Charles Poore in the *New York Times* "... as a portfolio of sketches and stories that memorably explore the dream and reality of the strange confederation of villages we call New York." The critics compared Mr. Horwitz to Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson, Gorki, O. Henry, E. B. White, Meyer Berger, and others. And many of the nation's critics shared Mr. Poore's observation when he wrote, "And rarer still is the New Yorker who knows as many parts of the town as Mr. Horwitz, who came here from Cleveland not many years ago, a young man just out of the Air Force looking for new worlds to conquer."

Mr. Horwitz was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1920. He attended Ohio State University and Columbia University, and he has a degree from the New School. In 1954, Mr. Horwitz was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for writing, and he spent his Guggenheim Fellowship in Europe and Israel. His stories and sketches have appeared in *Commentary* and *Midstream*.

Mr. Horwitz is married to Lois Sandler of Cleveland, and they have two children, Jonathan and David.



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